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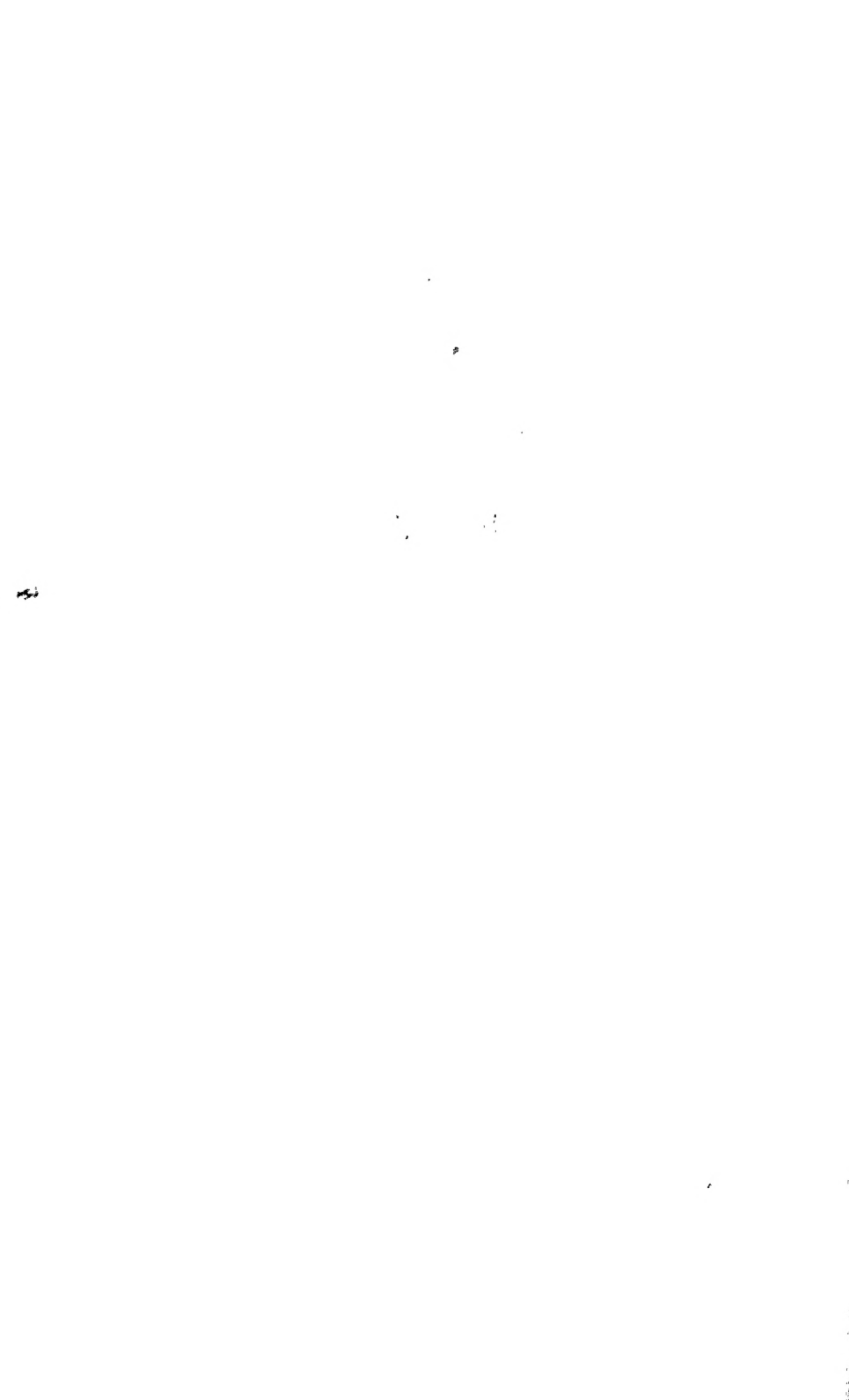
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REGIONAL CULTS AND RURAL TRADITIONS



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An Interacting Pattern of Divinity and
Humanity in Rural Bengal



R.M. SARKAR

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*Dedicated to My
Father
and
Mother*

Foreword

THIS interesting work is an attempt to analyse the way of life of rural people through the study of village cults and village deities. Although village cults are of an all-India phenomenon, they are still very effective in West Bengal. Village life in the countryside is characterized by a high degree of stratification, existence of notion of purity and pollution and enormous disparity in wealth and status. However, when it is a question of propitiation of village deities and celebration of festivals, all these distinctions become insignificant. It is also seen that village deities work as a binding force for the village society which itself is segmented on account of various factors. In addition to this, the processes involved in the worship cement fraternal feelings among villages in the neighbourhood. Inter-caste and inter-community interactions are promoted in course of participation of various sectors of rural population in the propitiation of village deities. The patterns of propitiation, feasts and festivals of the five principal village deities, viz., Chandi, Manasa, Dharmaraj, Mahadana and Kali in different villages have been systematically analysed to illustrate various aspects of life activities of the village folk. The region under study covers a large territory extending from the border regions of Birbhum and Santhal Parganas districts and includes some parts of the district of Burdwan. The region has witnessed the mingling of influence from various sources as also many political and religious upheavals.

The village deities emerge as mechanism for maintaining social solidarity and cultural harmony and cut across high and low segments such as *Jal-chal* (castes from which water can be accepted), *Jal-achal* (castes from which water cannot be accepted), *Chhut* (touchable) and *Achhut* (untouchable).

The origin of various village deities have been traced from

both history and mythology. The social functions of village cults through ages in this particular area have been analysed at some length. In the analysis, the interaction between Shastric and indigenous belief-pattern, the roles of Brahmin priests and non-Brahmin ritual functionaries is also sought to be examined. The study highlights the various social forces for the understanding of traditions in rural societies in Indian civilization.

I commend this book to all students of Indian civilization as well as to scholars in Social Anthropology and Indology. Dr. Sarkar has shown how anthropological techniques can be used to unravel the mysteries of complex civilizations.

SACHCHIDANANDA
Vice-Chancellor,
Ranchi University,
Ranchi.

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My cordial thanks are due to numerous friends and well-wishers, inhabiting at the different villages of the region of my field of study, who not only helped me in the collection of required data but also extended their active cooperation constantly as my friend, philosopher and guide. They are practically beyond the reach of my showing mere gratitude to them. Sri Sadananda Acharya and his son Sriman Bamdev left no stone unturned to provide me trouble-free accommodation and necessary guidance in conducting field tour through the inaccessible rural areas around Bakreswar. Sri Ajit Kumar Mitra of Gobindapur took initiative all through the time in the deepest search and requisite interpretation of the village deities and connected cults. Sri Ashanandan Chattaraj, a renowned folk song composer of the region, and Sri Biswa Mohan Sarkar, my younger brother, had been by my side many a time which, no doubt, lessened the hardship of tour through inaccessible village paths. All of them deserve special thanks.

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Calcutta

R.M. SARKAR

Preface

THE present study aims at looking into the close perspectives of the regional cults flourished in the midst of the rural society highly characterized by variegated castes and communities with conspicuous inequalities in different spheres of life. It promises to open a new vista to facilitate smooth entry into the realm of unique life-pattern and thought-pattern of the people whose actions are highly conditioned by the innate activities of the regional cults. These are regarded as "cults of the middle range—more far-reaching than any parochial cult of the little community, yet less inclusive in belief and membership than a world religion in its universal form" (Werbner, 1977 : IX). The cults in question are characteristically found to function in remote villages, in inaccessible localities and even in the wilderness away from human habitations. These cults are provided with their own topographic features and full-fledged conceptual background which have got firm foundation in the inner recess of the minds of man. The regional cults develop and nurture numerous age-old beliefs and practices, thoughts and ideas, forming a depth-oriented traditional background.

India's rural life is highly influenced by social stratification formed by various caste organizations. The rural communities with diverse socio-economic and religio-philosophical perspectives live in an atmosphere of cohesion and conflict within the village boundary and various actions of the individual as well as the social groups form a distinctive system. This system has been studied and analysed from various angles by many scholars since long time past, and they have been successful in unfolding many underlying features of social actions. India's rural society is effectively moulded by the different indigenous patterns of propitiation of village deities who exert their multifarious influence on the life and living of the people irrespective of

castes, classes and religions. The unique feature of these indigenous deities is the creation of a particular atmosphere in the village society where all stratified social groups become unified by breaking through all the barriers and work together for some common purpose after forgetting, though for a short duration but in a regular fashion, all the age-old norms of the graded society. The more or less static social order as exemplified by caste experiences flexibility which ultimately delve deep into the regular and traditional pattern of village life. This situation brings forth an interacting pattern of behaviour amongst the variegated castes and communities resulting in the inter-change of thoughts and ideas amongst the diverse spheres of socio-cultural groups characterized by distinct life-ways and thought-ways. The trend of interactions between the indigenous religious beliefs and the orthodox Brahminical religious thoughts has been focused here by way of analysing the different stages as well as different components of worship of the village deities. The nature and extent of participation of rural folk during the various stages of worship and manner of their observance in folk festivals, from far and near, have been effectively analysed and the results of which are taken into consideration to view the society as a whole. This sort of study requires both intensive and extensive field investigations over a particular territory for a long span of time, and the data thus collected deserve critical analysis in the perspective of the life-philosophy of the region. The region of study selected for this purpose has got profound antiquity and for long it acted as the western gateway of Bengal. The jungle-covered localities of the region were the abode of many indigenous communities which came in direct conflict with the new entrants bearing different sets of values and cultural patterns. The age-old conflict and cohesion between these two population groups and also amongst the branched off distinct sub-groups made the whole socio-cultural perspectives excessively complicated. These complicated features are still to be found reflected in the intra-village and inter-village *puja* performances and festivals of village deities that take place everywhere on this vast tract of land. The shrines of the village deities and the cults centering round these are the store houses of concrete evidence of socio-cultural interactions amongst large number of social groups through the ages. On the whole, the

work depicts a dynamic dimension of rural society through the analytical exposition of the nature and extent of its integrated workings in the perspective of divinity and humanity. The interacting patterns of divine world and human society have been assessed here with concrete field data based sociological analysis through a novel way of interpreting folk cults centering round indigenous village deities nurtured by age-old rural traditions.

Calcutta

R.M. SARKAR

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Introduction

I

THE study of rural communities is not new in the domain of social sciences and specially in Sociology and Social Anthropology considerable importance has been and is being attached to investigate systematically into the life and activities of human communities in rural setting. In a village dominated country with chequered social and cultural life like India study of rural communities has got an intrinsic value to understand the actual nature of the variegated features of society and culture as a whole. The innate philosophy of Indian life can best be understood from the tradition-bound age-old villages which are regarded as "a concept, a way of life" (Majumdar, 1958: 324), an integrated pattern of human thoughts and activities, hopes and desires. India's village life had attracted the serious attention of the scholars even during the colonial administration of the British. The study of Baden Powell¹ (1896) is noteworthy in this regard. Since then a few scholars came forward to highlight various phases of Indian village life. But those works had nothing to do with the internal features of working of the village communities. It is during the middle of the twentieth century when a few social scientists have taken initiative in analysing various social processes centering round life and activities in villages. It was followed by a large number of village studies made by both Indian and foreign scholars. Some were monographic works, and others were the collection of various essays on village life

prepared by distinguished authors. The first exhaustive monograph on an Indian village was brought out by Dube (1955) which was centralized on the different aspects of village life. On the other hand, the collection of essays on Indian village life which, first of all, started to publish in the *Economic Weekly* (1951-52) and later on took a book-form edited by Srinivas (1955). In the same year another anthology of Indian village studies, edited by Marriott, saw the light of the day. The authors of the different essays conducted extensive studies on respective villages to find out the interlacing factors of different spheres of life and also the impact of change through the clash of traditional and modern forces of life and activities in the villages. While writing the valuable foreword of the book in question Redfield and Singer have emphasized that "as anthropologists continue to make Indian community studies, they will be more and more required to exercise their scientific strategy in justifying the choices they make of the few villages, out of the many, that it will be possible to report at all fully" (1955: vii). Following these a considerable number of studies on village life in India have been prepared till date by many sociologists and social anthropologists in India and from other countries. It would, no doubt, be a very time-consuming affair to discuss, even in brief, all the works on Village India so far conducted. These studies focus variegated approaches in the presentation of the problems and which are based on different methods and procedures. The results of these studies have got significant role in reconstructing country's lost glory and reviving cultural heritage. These "provide the future historian with a vast body of facts about rural social life, facts collected not by travellers in a hurry, but by men who are trained to observe keenly and accurately" (Srinivas, 1955: 226). The attempt of viewing the village as a biotic community has long been vehemently criticized by Dube and he has noted that "any effort to understand the village without reference to its extensions in time and space in the social, cultural and ideological contexts, are bound to be partial and incomplete" (1961: 120). In order to root out this defect from the sphere of Indian village community studies special care should be taken to see that the villages are being studied not as isolated whole but as independent entities clung together in

the collective understanding conditioned by time-bound affair and regional perspectives. "It is necessary to evolve an approach that would take account of the historical and regional determinants that shape and condition the culture of a village" (Dube, 1961: 120). Socio-cultural life of Village India is largely influenced by customs and traditions with profound antiquated background which can only be explored and analysed through holistic approach of the regional conditioning based on certain universal thoughts and ideas as well as unified activities. Life in a rural setting cannot be focused adequately through the study of a single village community, rather the eyes of the researcher should be extended over the region where a number of villages maintain a pattern of living in the background of different inevitable factors.

II

While analysing the nature and extent of peasant society Redfield assesses the need for studying the interlacing factors which tie up the different human communities from one another. There are various social phenomena which do a great deal in embracing a large and divergent group spread over an extensive territory. He emphasizes that in India "the internal unity of the village is qualified or balanced by the unity that is felt by the villager with a fellow caste member of another village" (1956: 55). This village to village unity is exemplified by other factors also. As for example, the country-wide network of rural northern India has been based on wide-spread marriage connections. A beautiful relationship pattern has been forged amongst a large number of villages over a wide area on the basis of arranging marriages of the boys and girls. It has been pointed out by Smith (1953) in his 'Study on Punjab Village'. Marriott has also reported strong bondage of relationship that is established on marriage ceremonies amongst boys and girls of different villages. During the period of his study at Kishan Garhi he observed fifty-seven marriages which connected the village in question with sixteen towns and cities (1955: 179). From a critical observation on the different social phenomena Redfield has stressed that "the principal elements of the country-wide network of India

consist of familial and caste associations that persist through generations" (1955: 56). The nature and extent of this particular mesh are to be analysed through different human behaviour patterns in order to understand country-wide networks.

The pattern of integrated relationship amongst large number of villages based on social, economic, political or religious phenomena deserves special attention of the social scientists as Indian rural life is all the time characterized by inter-village co-operation and also conflict. Redfield's indication is, no doubt, a pointer towards this situation and Marriott's study on marriage relations, though a feeble attempt, to trace the inter-village network of social relations, is a befitting procedure in the field of rural community study in India. Inter-acting patterns of thoughts and ideas of different villages can best be understood with the help of different beliefs and attitudes centered round indigenous religious phenomena based on village deities—who are the essential factors in each and every village of India. No exhaustive attempt has yet been made in India, to focus this part of rural life through the analysis of popular beliefs and practices though this has got a very good prospect in the arena of social research. Carstairs has conducted a study on three villages in Rajasthan through the utilization of religious behaviour patterns and he observes that "the development of modern field studies by social anthropologists has confronted us with the need to grapple with the vast conglomeration of popular beliefs, and to find some clues by which it may be better understood" (1961: 55). Though this study is mainly planned to evaluate the different forms of worships and people's mode of behaviour, yet there are successful attempts in tracing "the sense of belonging to a vast and all-embracing community" (1961: 106) through religious life.

One of the main purposes of the present work is to analyse the network of relationship amongst a number of villages extending over a vast region. This study departs from the previous works designed to show the inter-relationship pattern in village societies through the different social and economic factors like caste, marriage, *jajmani* system² and ritual performances. Mention may be made that it is not a stereotyped

study on a village or villages but it betokens an analytical approach on a region with a good number of villages characterized by diverse castes and communities. A systematic picture of socio-cultural life of these villages has been drawn here through a completely different but not alien procedure.³ The present work deals with ten villages in particular on a large tract of land extending mainly over the district of Birbhum and partly over the district of Burdwan in West Bengal. The village deities and their various workings on man and his society have become the subject-matter of studying country-wide network. It has been shown how the village deities work as a binding force for not only the different dissimilar social segments but also the villages with various diversities. This study claims to open a new ground as it has undertaken a much-discussed, comprehensive, and explicitly tradition-bound factor in a completely new and changed perspective in focusing light on the workings of the rural societies.

III

Village gods and goddesses have been and are being studied from time immemorial. "Village deities are an all-India phenomenon" (Srinivas, 1952: 179). Gait has pointed out that in India "almost every village has its special tutelary deities (one or more), which preside over the welfare of the community" (1901: 215). These *gramya devatas* or village deities have sprung up at the foot of the tree, in the open paddy fields and their worship is mostly conducted by the people themselves. He has observed that some village deities are less local than others and have found a wider vogue. These village deities are propitiated to serve different purposes. There are some deities whose worships are performed "when disease breaks out or a newly-built house is occupied for the first time" (1901: 215). Some are worshipped to protect the village from disease and other calamities, others are propitiated during the time of drought. Whitehead observes the worship of village deities as the most ancient form of Indian religion. In his monumental works in South India he finds "each village seems to have been under the protection of someone spirit, who was its guardian

deity" (1921: 11). From the large number of studies conducted in rural communities it has been understood that in almost all the villages throughout India village deities take a dominant role in the overall life and activities of the villages. There are numerous rites and ceremonies centering round propitiations of these village deities which are carefully observed by the villagers. These rites are exclusively different from those of the orthodox Hindu divinities. The village deities are specially meant to illustrate the facts of village life and to help the people to adjust themselves within the spiritual atmosphere in a limited circle; on the other hand, the Puranic Hindu gods⁴ have a wider jurisdiction (Bhattacharya, 1955: 20). Crooke put forward the existence of well-organized shrine of village deities in the villages of Northern India. "The shrine of the regular village godling, the *Gramadevata* or *Gawndevata*, is generally a square building of brick masonry with a balbous head and perhaps an iron spike as a finial, a red flag hung on an adjoining tree, often a *pipal*, or some other sacred fig, or a *min*, marks the position of the shrine" (Crooke, 1896: 96). He made a fascinating study on the forms and nature of worship of these deities in the villages of Northern India. He observed that "there are, as might have been expected, many methods of identifying and establishing the local gods" (1896: 101).

These village deities have been penetrated into the inner races of life and activities of the common folk as at every step of their life the village folk feel the essential necessity to approach these deities for kindness, advice and suggestions. They are, in other words, regarded as the guardians of the village folk as a whole. The deities have appeared in the midst of social surroundings of man as if for the cause of human communities. "There are various sub-types of local deities, such as ghosts, disease-controllers, village-guardians; they are not exalted in scripture and are little mentioned in the sacred literature. Their names, forms and rituals vary from place to place according to the regional vernacular, but their functions seem to be quite constant" (Mandelbaum, 1964: 10). The village deities are to be identified by different names—"some of them have an obvious meaning, many are quite unintelligible to the people themselves" (Whitehead, 1921: 21). These names

are mostly derived from non-Aryan sources but through the slow process of Hinduization⁵ a tendency has been noticed to Sanskritize the names at the cost of their original forms (Bhattacharya, 1955: 21). In most of the villages there are considerable inclinations to orient the names of local deities by suffixing the names of Puranic gods and goddesses to the names of village deities with indigenous nature. Most of the time the village deities have got local origin and their worship is specially organized by the people belonging to the lower sections. A vast number of folklores are seen to be associated with the different stages of origin, spread and nature of worship of these deities. Almost all the folk stories centering round the different village deities are characterized by exaggerated facts. But all of these reflect the events of the hoary past—there are numerous evidences of impositions of many thoughts and ideas relating to different religious faith through the ages. "Stories are able to adopt themselves to any local and social climate. They are old and venerable, but they are also new and up-to-date" (Degh, 1972: 53). These stories come in direct help in illuminating the shaded background of any cultural setting. On the whole, the village deities work as assimilating factors of different views and cogitations and, naturally, systematic analysis of the nature and extent of propitiation, folklore and traditions of these deities opens up a new horizon of studying folk religion in the background of interacting patterns with other greater religious traditions.

The village deities in almost all parts of the world are shrouded in the belief that if they are properly propitiated, the propitiators and their followers would be relieved of hazardous situations of life that generally come in the form of epidemics and at the same time they would be blessed with good harvest and trouble-free life. In the cult of these deities a collective action of the whole society is found to be reflected. Redcliffe-Brown has noted three important features in the cult of the village deities. Though the villages as a whole take part in the cult of the deities but there are occasions when one caste-group "is able, within a cult, to establish its own unity and its separation from other groups" (1952: vii). There are various instances of unity not only within a particular village during the performance of the cult, but also a considerable trend of

co-operation is felt amongst the behaviour pattern of the different villages. The local deities become assimilated with the gods and goddesses of the broader Hindu traditions.

In studying the nature and extent of rural society through the organization of cults of the village deities considerable help is to be taken from the spheres of folklore and cultural traditions that have developed round different feasts and festivals, beliefs and attitudes, hopes and desires which constitute the way of life. "The folk serve as repositories of the ancient language and popular traditions of the nation, and his legacy must be firmly recorded and made known to the citizens of the modern State (Dorson, 1961 : 3). Folklore is the store-house of hidden, forgotten and backward culture and it serves as a basic medium of exploring the remote past as well as the present situations of a community. While analysing the intent of folklore Dorson asserts that "this culture of the folk was hidden in two ways : deep in remote time, in a pre-historic past, when early man perceived the world animistically, or at least in the pre-Christian era, when pagan man indulged in barbarous rites; and far off in place, away from the busy centres of civilization, in the peasant villages of the country-side and mountain ridges" (1961 : 3). Collection and study of folklore materials in India have been and are being made by different scholars but until recently no systematic attempt has been made to evaluate these folkloric materials for understanding human society in action. Credit goes to the eminent Indian anthropologist, S.C. Roy, to draw, for the first time, the attention of scholars working in the field of folklore and traditions for making necessary attempts in utilizing these vast treasures of the country to throw light on the working of human society and culture (1932 : 356). In course of time, Elwin, Srinivas, Majumdar, Dube, Vidyarthi and Indra Deva have taken initiative in the study of society through folklore materials though their studies, excepting the work of Indra Deva, were principally centralized on tribal life. Utilization of folklore and traditions in understanding Indian society and culture has been effectively made by the joint effort of the American Anthropological Association. Some eminent Indian and foreign scholars have made analytical studies on Indian castes, communities, festivals and religions in the conceptual background of India's age-old cultural traditions under the able leadership

of Milton Singer (1959). All these works are the embodiments of the proper utilization of traditional aspects of human life and folklore materials that have been accumulated in the day-to-day life of the society in the evolution of socio-cultural factors of India's rural life. "These studies have two major bonds of unity. One of these is the underlying unity and continuity of Indian civilization itself The second unifying bond is that of method and concept in the study of civilization" (1959 : 326). The work in question has been directly influenced by Redfield's idea how a civilization can be understood through analysing the structure of traditions. This particular concept of Redfield has opened a new vista in the evaluation of indigenous thoughts and ideas in the perspective of the Great Traditions⁶ of Indian Civilization. Both Redfield and Singer have pointed out in their respective studies that the genesis and functioning of indigenous civilizations are largely influenced by "continued interactions between a Great Tradition, as abstracted and systematized by the specialist literati, mainly in urban centres, and the Little Traditions of the Little Communities" (Singer, 1955 : 84). The pattern of interactions of these two traditions that are exemplified by origin, spread and establishment of the village deities and also by the conflict and compromise, avoidance and accommodation in the different modes of behaviour, are characteristically reflected in the cult of the village deities and people's participation. Attempts have been made here to point out various overt and covert features of interactions between the indigenous and broader Hindu traditions in the different stages of the folk cults.

There can be no denying of the fact that the study of traditions in the analysis of Indian society has got intrinsic value. Mukherjee has stressed that while studying Indian society one "must be an Indian first, that is, he is to share in the folkways, mores, customs and traditions for the purpose of understanding his social system and what lies between it and beyond it. He should be steeped in the Indian lore, both high and low" (1958 : 238). Redfield maintains that "that the word tradition connotes the act of handing down and what is handed down from one generation to another" (1962 : 392). The traditions are considered as cumulative by beliefs, attitudes, customs and habits, and these are transmitted from generations to generations through

written scriptures or orally. The latter is known by the term 'oral traditions' and these have got tremendous value in highlighting allied cultural perspectives. In primitive and peasant societies, myths and legends are parts of oral traditions and these are seen to specify the supernatural entities, discuss the origin of things, explain the very nature of reality, and assert the proper organization of values (Messenger, 1972 : 220). After conducting a broad-based study on Indian life and activities Singer supports this view. He states that "the oral tradition in India has played a unique role. There, although writing was known from a very early date, the highest tradition of religion and culture were preserved chiefly by oral means" (1959 : 14). Systematic analysis of these oral traditions demands a broad-based knowledge in the study of folklore. In India, folklore has been playing vital role in human life and activities. Roy observes that the people of India live in "an atmosphere of folklore from cradle to the grave" (1932 : 357). Folklore is the collective enterprise of various aspects of human experience. As a necessary consequence, folklore is to be studied and folkloristic materials are to be utilised in the perspective of inter-disciplinary understanding. Bascom has rightly remarked that as a verbal art, folklore has been the primary concern of folklorists from both humanities and social sciences since the beginning of folklore as a field of study. Gomme's observations, though made seventy years ago, highlight the same principle when he says "folklore cannot be studied alone. Alone it is of little worth. As part of the inheritance from bygone ages it cannot separate itself from the condition of bygone ages. Those who would study it carefully, and with purpose, must consider it in the light which is shed by it and upon it from all that is contributory to the history of man" (1908 : 15). In the sphere of studying social values and their implications on cultural roles folklore has proved itself efficacious in entering into the inner recess of life and also to strengthen the cultural background of the community concerned, "The concern with folklore and the rise of a nationalistic spirit frequently coincide. Small nations, like Finland and Ireland, assert their cultural independence by reviving their original tongue, and assiduously collecting the folk epics and ages, verses and legends transmitted by their people in those tongues" (Dorson, 1963 : 96). It is noted that

"ever since twenties, studies by Soviet Russian folklorists have been stressing the social uses of folklore rather than questions of origin and migration" (Oinas and Soudakoff, 1972 : 4). In Russia, folklore has been extensively used to shape the people's mind since folklore is considered to have great propaganda value. In recent years Indra Deva advocates that in India the best way of analysing the different forces of socio-cultural matrix is centered round the study of vast treasures of folklore. He emphasises that the functional aspect of folklore would be dominated and meaningful when proper steps are taken to analyse the underlying expressions contained in any folkloric material. He maintains, "the symbolic significance of many ritualistic practices connected with serpent worship in various parts of India is strikingly illuminated when we analyse the meanings of songs connected with it. This is also true of many other mythical tales and songs connected with rituals of various kinds" (1972 : 204). Mention may be made, in this connection, that India provides a vast field as regards this particular attempt of analysing ritualistic performances which have been shrouded in different thoughts and ideas from various religious sentiments through the ages. The present study may be regarded as a sincere attempt under such a viewpoint. It intends to bring forth various interacting processes characterized by age-old clashes of Little and Great Traditions in indigenous cults of the village deities with special emphasis on the functioning of rural society through the propitiation of these deities and performances of various rituals. The connected folk literatures have been presented here systematically and these have been treated with due care. Though there are various disadvantages and conspicuous limitations to rest on folk literatures⁷ as fully dependable in the analysis of various sociological processes, yet these have been organised largely to portray the patterns of interactions through the ages. Special care has been taken, whenever necessary, to verify the observations and ultimate results of study from other sources (Deva, Indra, 1972 : 203). The folk literature of rural India are evidenced by effective interactions of different communities and religious groups, and proper analysis of these would present many features of actions and interactions. In his monumental work on folk literature D.C. Sen remarks, "the incantations and *mantras*⁸ used by Moslem fakirs and physicians for

curing diseases and the hymns of Lakshmi⁹—the harvest goddess—recited by a class of Mohammedan mendicants—are full of references to gods of the Hindu and Buddhistic pantheons, and I have tried to trace the continuity of this folklore and folk-wisdom current amongst Mohammedans, from a remote time when they had not yet accepted Islam but had been Buddhists or Hindus” (1920 : xv-xvi). The study of folk literature, of course, with proper analysis presents the socio-cultural background of the region or the community concerned. Boswell and Reaver think “such a study of folk literature should result in an increased awareness of cultural heritage, a sensitiveness to the varying way of life typical of one’s environment, and new approach to literary understanding” (1912 : 7). Religion has always been one of the main motives of literature. “It has been so in all countries and particularly in India which is pre-eminently a land of religions” (Dasgupta, 1946 : xxiii). Some attempts have been made here to pin-point the nature and extent of cultural transmissions between rural and urban people and also between caste and tribal groups in the field of ritualistic performances attached to the village deities in addition to the usual blending of thoughts and ideas amongst the different classes of people belonging to the villages. Rural-urban and caste-tribe cultural continuity has become very much distinctive in the various stages of folk cults.

IV

The study of cults of the village deities in understanding life-ways and thought-ways of the rural folk, as has been presented here, is no doubt a departure from the stereotyped village studies for having practical idea over the actual pattern of life there. The main theme of this treatise is centered round indigenous religious behaviour which differ in many respects from orthodox religion. The former is particularly related to the propitiation of village deities and, therefore, it may be referred as folk religion. Study of human society on the basis of religious beliefs and ideas has found due importance in the works of sociologists and anthropologists. Religion is a universal phenomenon and naturally it has attracted due attention of the researchers studying human behaviour-pattern. Some of them have made full

utilization of religious concepts to focus the cultural heritage of the people concerned. They have shown that religion plays a vital role in shaping the structure and function of life in a community. But the religion and its interacting forces must be studied from requisite depth so that the researcher can concentrate on the religious language which is regarded as the inevitable aspect in the grasping of religious concepts (Firth, 1959: 231-232). He has also emphasized that many religious values and concepts in non-literate societies can be better understood if seen in the light of cultural and social institutions. Religion very often supports the norm of a society which finally contributes to the maintenance of the social order. Customs and practices on which the peaceful working of a social system depends are reinforced by religious sanctions. (Saliba, 1976: 162). Wallace views religion of a society as a conglomeration of rituals and beliefs whose components are seen to be integrated at the level of cult institutions (1966 : 69). Moreover, he focuses discernible light on the functional aspects of religion by examining the intentions of performers of particular rituals : to control nature, to make people sick or well, to organise human behaviour, to remit psychopathology, and to revitalize society (169-187). Importance of studying interacting patterns that exist between religion and society has been whole-heartedly admitted by almost all social scientists. Geertz has remarked, "Religion is sociologically interesting not because it describes the social order, but because, like environment, political power, jural obligation, personal affection and a sense of beauty, it shapes it" (1966 : 35-36). In this connection we must focus Durkheim's idea that religion is nothing but a symbol of society. Society was raised to the level of godhood. Whatever may be the fact, it should be kept in mind that impact of religion on society and culture differs from society to society. In non-literate societies this relationship seems to be more closer than in the universal religion amongst advanced group of people. The integrating factor of religion and society is very much predominant in India and on this ground the scholars have found it advantageous to study Indian social customs and behaviour through the analysis of religious practices maintained by the people concerned. Embree has rightly remarked that "while it is probably true that it is difficult to consider religious ideas apart from their social structure in any

society, in Indian culture it is manifestly impossible" (1966: 32). In village society it is somewhat outstanding and more acute; the village folk always try to solve their day-to-day problems through divine world which is, they think and feel, at the door-steps. On this ground it is fruitful, to a large extent, to study and analyse the general behaviour pattern and reciprocal relationship amongst people belonging to different classes, castes and communities. Knowing the village folk through the study of folk religion is the central theme of discussions put forward in this study. The religious structure in a society may be divided into two broad aspects—popular religion and systematic religion. The former refers to the religion of the common people and the latter is restricted to the beliefs and practices of the so-called "advanced" groups of mankind (Arya, 1975 : 134). The folk religion, more or less, falls at par with popular religion. The word 'folk' needs some explanation in this connection. It embraces non-literate or semi-literate groups of people. These people are, no doubt, backward in their thoughts and ideas in comparison with the so-called advanced or elite sections of the society but they are not totally primitive in character like the tribes. The tribal religion pin-points a different set of values and ideas which basically differs from popular religion. The folk generally include the village population in its totality, also they embrace people in the urban settings who in spite of living in the "advanced" areas cling to popular religion. Most of the time the latter group belongs to the lower sections of the society so far as castes and communities are concerned.¹⁰ Therefore, the folk religion can easily be called "as the way of life of the great majority of people in the villages who constitute the peasantry". It is characterized by liberal attitudes, simpler procedures and incorporating tendencies.

The pattern of propitiation, feasts and festivals of five principal types of village deities at ten different villages have been presented here to illuminate variegated life of village folk. These villages under study are distributed over a large tract of land extending from the border region of Birbhum and Santal Pargana¹¹ districts of West Bengal and Bihar, respectively, in the north, up to the district of Burdwan (West Bengal) in the south. This tract of land has got the experience of witnessing so many political and religious feuds through the

ages. In the remote past human civilization flourished at this tract and through numerous ups and downs, actions and interactions it reached the highest peak of development. The antiquity of human civilization is evidenced by multiple phenomena in the contemporary life of the people which have been discussed elsewhere in this treatise. The village deities flourished in these villages of this region must necessarily have gone through a long process of interactions of various thoughts and ideas and, as a natural consequence, the deities have become the store-houses of multitude beliefs and practices, customs and ceremonies flowed from different social and religious sentiments. "Though the village deities have got all-India characters and everywhere in this country the mode of worship is more or less based on similar principle yet . . . there are important regional variations. Generally speaking, within India, each region or district has a greater unity than the larger area of which it is a part" (Srinivas, 1952: 179).

The present area of study in West Bengal has got a very ancient background and it is regarded as the evolutionary as well as developmental centres of numerous village deities. The soil of Bengal has ever been very much fertile in the flourishing of multifarious village deities who not only have exerted tremendous influence in the celestial field of the village folk but also they have "contributed a great deal to maintain her classless character of social life. Rural people, irrespective of caste, assemble at the same congregation to offer community worship to the folk deities" (Bhattacharyya, 1977: 7). In spite of the rapid changing situation throughout the country resulting in overall change in the way of life of the people, the rural societies in the interior part of West Bengal still present indigenous folk cults which have "developed some special features due to her own natural character and cultural background" (Bhattacharyya, 1977: 7). The village deities in the region under study are the practical embodiments of maintaining social solidarity and cultural harmony through some specialized cults which cut across the stratified society with high and low, *jal chal* and *jal ahal*¹² as well as *chhut* and *achhut*¹³ conceptions.

This study highlights the functional aspects of village deities who have made their appearance there to fulfil the

basic need of man. Different unfavourable circumstances in his daily life have compelled man to instal various deities and organise their worship to tide over practical crises in life. Much have been said about the mode of origin of these village deities and their nature of assimilation of various religious ideas through the ages, but no overall study has yet been made uptill now to analyse the social and cultural roles played by the village deities in this particular region where the life of the common people is largely influenced and governed directly by the cults of the village deities. This study would provide a new angle of vision to find out the nature of the actual factors directly responsible for thorough integration amongst the unidentical castes, classes and communities despite their social distance. Such a study may help in understanding the regulating principles of social solidarity and mutual co-operation which can ultimately be broadly utilised during the implementation of programmes for abandonment of untouchability and minimising social distance, tension and conflicts amongst various groups of people. Mutual understanding and brotherly feeling amongst the variegated castes and communities in India are the need of the present period to ameliorate the trend of united living. India is traditionally a land of unity in diversity and perhaps it is India's greatest strength to maintain cultural harmony. This particular feature can be analysed scientifically through micro-studies at the different regions of the country. Our present work would play an important role in such a type of micro-study as it investigates into the united activities and joint responsible-oriented works amongst the village people with diverse castes, classes and communities. In recent years, serious attempts are being made to recover the lost heritage of the country and the people. Systematic study of these cults centering round the village deities must have got inevitable necessity as these are rooted to the cultural matrix of the village folk and on this ground "the importance of collecting the rapidly disappearing data in this field for scientific study is now widely recognised and encouraged, not least because of the light that thereby may be thrown upon the function of these time-honoured observances in maintaining the solidarity and sense of continuity in the communal life of a community" (Jame, 1961: 319).

V

Peasant life, especially in India, is highly characterized by rites and rituals, customs and traditions. In order to make holistic approach to the peasant life, flourished in the villages, which are termed as 'India's life-centres', systematic study is to be conducted on the folkloristic materials that have acquired various shapes resorting to different folk activities. But at the time of studying peasant societies through the main stream of folk traditions one faces a great difficulty regarding a well-knit methodological procedure. This situation has been resulted because of the fact that "social scientists have not been able even to evolve an adequate conceptual and methodological framework for the study of such societies. In this context the study of folklore which constitutes the institutionalized channel and store of their traditional knowledge, beliefs, values and attitudes, can be of immense help" (Deva, Indra, 1972: 205). In the present study of the indigenous cults relating to the life styles of rural folk the folkloristic approach¹⁴ would probably be of considerable assistance as "folklore would seem to be the one field with a transcendent interest in the issue leaping the walls of specialized discipline" (Dorson, 1973: 7). It should be kept in mind that the impact of ritualistic phenomena on cultural aspects differ from society to society and that anthropologists have not been keen and careful enough to work out clear patterns of influence which are universally applicable (Saliba, 1976: 163).

Under the present circumstances, the data have been collected through different ways and following various techniques of social sciences according to the fitness of the situation. Dorson asserts, "the comparative folklorist must follow the trail of his theme wherever it leads him, and benefit from the researches of all who have worked with traditions" (1973: 7-8). It needs an inter-disciplinary approach, and for the present purpose it demands a free and systematic movement of the researcher in the domain of different social sciences and allied disciplines. Extensive utilization of both participant and non-participant observations have been made in the collection of vast data on village deities and their role on the life of man. The investigator visited the field on an extensive area very

frequently throughout the long period of four years starting from February 1973 up to January 1977. He stayed in the field for longer span of time (extending from one month to three months at a stretch) specially during the observances of the cults of the village deities and thereby found ample opportunities to make full utilization of Herskovits' indication, "See as much as you can, participate whenever you are permitted to do so, and compound your experience by discussing them formally with natives as widely as you are able" (1970: 84). In this particular work observations of both types have got intrinsic value and these techniques have been applied by the investigator after the lapse of considerable time in order to get himself well acquainted by the people. Malnowski has stressed that the field worker should totally immerse himself in the lives of the people he studies and which can be made possible only through long months of residence in the local scene." His famous dictum as contained in the advice of a sharp distinction to be drawn between "on the one hand, the results of direct observation and of native statements and interpretation, and on the other, the inferences of the author, based on his common sense and psychological insight" (1922: 3). Sincere attempts have been made at the time of doing field work and also during analysing data to see that this practical experience-based philosophy of field work of a towering personality in the sphere of field research may not be overlooked. In addition to long-term and broad-based observations data had also been collected through interviews of different kinds such as individual and group interviews, structured and unstructured. During ceremonial occasions group interviews were of tremendous help to assess the importance of various worships and their pattern of influence on the life of the rural folk. Structured and unstructured individual interviews were made constantly during field study. Collection of large mass of data concerning folk literature, myths, folk sayings, beliefs, superstitions and customs had been effected through individual and group interviews amongst the informants belonging to different age-groups of both sexes. Questionnaires had been used to a very limited extent for collection of data as most of the people of the area under study are illiterate and naturally the respondents did not find any opportunity

to fill in the schedules themselves. But the investigator did not neglect the most popular method of the present-day social researchers and he applied the method of questionnaire amongst the higher caste educated sections of the society and also amongst the moderately educated younger generations of the lower sections of the community, though very few in number, for getting some relevant informations. Key-informant interviewing technique was profitably adopted to get some concrete ideas about the customs and practices that have ceased to exist during the present period. Numerous customs relating to the village deities have been abolished, different practices performed by the people have found no place in the present-day society. But once these were essential factors of folk cults. In order to get a distinct idea about the past and present events clear conceptions should be derived from the experience of the past maintained in the minds of elderly persons. The actual source of available information is the recall of individuals who had been participants, directly or indirectly, in the past performances. By way of constant conversation and very close living with the people, the investigator could detect a few competent persons to be worked as key-informants and he was able to develop required capabilities in them through short-term systematic training to understand the actual nature of the theme on which the investigator worked. Key-informant interviews were always conducted during the event concerned or just after the particular event took place. Special emphasis had been laid on the systematic collection of life histories from a considerable number of persons, both male and female, who were found unusually eloquent and sensitive in their presentation of personal information. Life-history materials are considered by many social scientists as highly impressive as these "afford a vividness and integration of cultural information that are of great value for understanding particular life-ways" (Pelto, 1970: 99). The large number of life-histories collected from ten different villages have presented some concrete idea on the pattern of integration as well as dissociation amongst the different castes and communities through the ages. Also these have provided considerable opportunity to trace the actual trend of beliefs and attitudes of people towards the village deities and their

subsequent modifications during the different periods. Adoption of case history methods had been effected largely during the collection of data relating to the integral part of folk religion, curing of diseases, approaches of the devotees to the village deities for different purposes, various performances organised by the *deyashis*¹⁵ of the village deities including sorcery and exorcism.

The use of statistical data in social researches has been in vogue considerably following Durkheim's (1951) classic work on suicide. The statistical method provides quantitative dimensions to a phenomenon and hence, here facts are reduced to figures. Of late, statistical analysis of facts has proved to be of special importance to the sociologists and social anthropologists, though there are certain obvious limitations. Transformations of facts into figures have been made, in this work, at several occasions to pin-point the exact nature of the discussion in order to understand the total picture with profound clarity and precision.

The use of some technical equipments like tape-recorder, camera, etc., has proved to be of considerable help to the field worker which supplement his area of observation. Tape-recorder was used extensively by the present investigator to collect number of folk songs, folk tales and narratives, hymns and incantations in the propitiation of village deities as well as charms for driving out evil spirits. Special care had always been taken to see that the use of tape-recorder amongst the village folk might not cause to disturb the naturalness of performance and conversational flow. Importance of camera as research tool is now highly proclaimed by eminent ethnographers as the photography helps a lot in surveying and mapping of research site and in documenting complex events like festivals and celebrations. "Photographs are precise records of material reality. They are also documents that can be filed and cross-filed as can verbal statements" (Collier, Jr., 1967: 5). Systematic photographs of various spheres of human activities as well as topographical situations no doubt present well-knit views of different dimensions in minor details which can easily be analysed to serve various purposes. In the present study this visual anthropological research¹⁶ tool had been applied profitably to highlight the interacting patterns of variegated people through

feasts and festivals. Different hair-raising feats and various examples of self-immolation before the village deities, which formed part and parcel of folk culture of the region, could not have been so successfully presented without photographic techniques. These mechanical devices for collection of field data have been welcomed by most of the ethnographers of repute because of the fact that these have got some characteristic advantages. "If tape-recorder, camera, or video is set up and left in the same place, large batches of materials can be collected without the intervention of the film-maker or ethnographer and without the continuous self-consciousness of those who are being observed" (Mead, 1975: 9).

Considerable help is taken from secondary data to compare, contrast and verify different collected data and also to prepare socio-historical background of various aspects of study. Careful dependence on the documentary sources is necessary to get first-hand knowledge on the problems and prospects of the area of study. Different documents like population census, previous surveys by social scientists, court records, health statistics, newspapers, magazines, essays and treatise by social scientists and other allied scholars have been utilised to serve various purposes of the analysis of data. Extensive use of District Gazetteers, District Census Hand Book, Village Survey Monographs, Settlement and Survey Reports, District records including different previous work on social history of the region under study is made at the different periods of work and specially during finalization of the report. Secondary data have been used in this completely fieldwork-based study with due precaution and all possible efforts are made here to evaluate the basic situation of the data, wherever practicable, before utilising these in the formulation of any view point on rural society and culture.

Above universal research methods have been extensively used for the collection of data and though those are proved altogether helpful in conducting field investigation, yet some modifications have to be made according to situations in the context of Indian rural societies. These circumstances have, very often, been faced by many field workers during their period of study in the societies in question. "Apart from the fact that the larger civilizational context makes the experience of field work in India a little different from corresponding experiences

among the aboriginal populations of North America, Australia or Malanesia, the encounter between the field worker and his field presents certain distinctive features in India" (Beteille and Madan, 1975: 7). The attempt at exposition of the socio-cultural matrix of the rural folk with the help of analysing the nature and extent of the patterns of propitiation of the village deities and participation of variegated people in the attached cults is characterized by such distinctive features which have categorical importance in the domain of social research in India.

NOTES

1. Baden Powell, a British administrative officer, performed a fascinating study on Indian village communities. He collected valuable data on the revenue settlement records, district manuals, survey records and Gazetteers. Being inspired by Henry Maine's study, Powell came forward to record the different ethnographic and historical conditions of the Indian village. While evaluating the various facets of village life, he examined the tribes and villages to show the relationship pattern between castes and tribes in the perspective of village settlement. He advocates that the village is a group of persons as well as an aggregate of land holdings. He focuses his attention on the pattern of relationship of the persons with the land in a village society. Powell took main interest in pointing out the distinction between *raiya* village and joint village. The significance of Powell's work is his special attempt to examine the different kinds of villages in India and classify these according to their development. He differs from Maine in not trying to reconstruct the way of life from vestiges or cultural fossils.
2. The service relationship of diverse castes with others where each, in turn, is master and servant. In this system of economic relationship the different castes are tied together in mutual obligation and it is conditioned by tradition. It has an element of functional interrelatedness and interdependence. It differs from open market economy and the relationship between *jajman* and *kamin* is totally different from that of the employer and employee in a capitalistic system (Lewis, 1968). It is unique of its kind in India. This system of interrelatedness in service within the Hindu community was discovered for the first time, by W.H. Wiser in 1936. He discussed in detail how different goods and services in a village community are exchanged following a definite pattern. This economic pattern of relationship has been conceptualized as *jajmani* system by Wiser. The work was left unnoticed for many years though it was based on an analytical

study of 24 caste-groups in a village in U.P. . . This particular pattern of study has, in later years, been rejuvenated by Morris Opler, Oscar Lewis, H.A. Gould and many Indian scholars.

3. The main emphasis of the present study is centred round the nature and organization of worship of village deities in the background of tradition-bound intercaste relationship. The village deities have found considerable position in most of the village studies but nowhere the pattern of worship has been analysed to understand the social system in a particular rural setting. It should be noted that the study of village deities is not new but the actual pattern of analysing the inner significance of various folk rituals to understand the nature and extent of different social forces is no doubt a novel attempt. Indian village life is highly characterized by various rites and rituals, and as a natural consequence, it can be focused thoroughly by the systematic discussions on the worship of village deities packed up with ritualistic behaviour of the numerous castes and communities centering round some common interests.
4. Different gods and goddesses who have found positions in the various *Puranas* of the Hindu religious sect. In the *Puranas* there are numerous mythological events in the background of which different deities of the Hindu Pantheon have been evolved. There are special categories of origin and development, diverse responsibilities to be observed and various hierarchical situations within which the gods and goddesses are said to exert their influence on earth and man. There are occasions when the indigenous village deities have found a place in the domain of Puranic gods and goddesses through an elaborate procedure conditioned by time-long tradition and cultural impact of the people and the deities concerned. This phenomenon opens a new vista in the study of deities and their development through the ages.
5. It is a phenomenon in which the Hindu thoughts and ideas are slowly penetrated into the indigenous non-Hindu communities. Various social processes and ritualistic beliefs of the so-called aboriginal communities have thus received a thorough change over due to the infliction of the Hindu belief pattern nurtured by the advanced groups of people.
6. It is a tradition of the holders of higher positions in a given society. Redfield advocates that in a civilization there is a great tradition of the reflective few, and there is a little tradition of the largely unreflective many (1956: 70). Marriott's work on Great Tradition and Little Tradition in the socio-ritual spheres of Kisan Garhi village highlights the interacting pattern between these two sets of values. He emphasises that the "great tradition" which is characteristically developed by primary civilization, the indigenous tradition which grows out of its own folk culture, is a carrying forward of cultural materials, norms and values that were already contained in the local little traditions. . . An indigenous great tradition remains in constant

- communication with its own little traditions through a sacred literature, a class of literati, a sacred geography, and the rights and ceremonies associated with each of these" (Marriott, 1961: 185-186).
7. The vast amount of oral traditional materials constituting the long narratives centering round various folk deities and cults. In these narrative poems various aspects of folk beliefs, customs, superstitions and sentiments are seen to be reflected in these different stages. These also serve to depict the origin, development and functions of different indigenous deities in the background of the communities concerned. It also helps categorically in assessing the nature and extent of infiltration of other cultural features through the ages. (For details, please see Bhattacharyya, Asutosh—History of Bengali Folk Cults and Narrative Poems, in Bengali, (1950).
 8. It is the assemblage of oral formulae that are composed for favour of requesting help of a particular god or gods, supernatural beings in order to fulfil certain desire. The mysterious power contained in the sound of a particular syllable or a string of such syllables is to be regarded as a social heritage of the Indian people. The *mantra* is learnt and transmitted through oral tradition from person to person.
 9. Goddess of wealth. She is worshipped by each and every household on Thursday regularly. Most of the families possess a special altar inside the house where the goddess Lakshmi is ceremonially established. Besides weekly worship it is the custom to offer burning lamp to the goddess every evening by the housewives. Lakshmi marks the year in many ways. Her worship is performed in the *Pous* festival. The month of *Pous* (December-January) is regarded as the month of the goddess Lakshmi as the harvest of annual crops are largely made in this month. She is specially worshipped in the new rice-eating celebration at the courtyard of every household in the hope that She would bring fortune to the family concerned.
 10. The word 'folk' has been discussed by different scholars in diverse ways. Most of the time it has been defined as a dependent rather than an independent unity. It is defined in contrast to or in opposition with some other population group. Bascom defines 'folk' as a group of people who share at least one common factor which may be a common occupation, language or religion. But the most important matter lies in the fact that a group formed for whatever reason will have some traditions which it calls its own (1977: 22). It was Robert Redfield who, first of all, conducted concrete anthropological study on folk community. He understood folk culture as a 'type' differentiated from non-folk or sophisticated culture by the degree of its isolation and localism. Dundes defines 'folk' as a "group of people who constituted in the lower stratum, the so-called 'vulgus in populo'—in contrast to the upper stratum or elite of that society" (1977: 18). The members of the group may not be known to each other but everybody should know the common core of cultural tradition which constitutes the sense of group solidarity.

11. A district of Bihar province. It is situated at the western side of West Bengal. The Santal Parganas are bounded on the north by the districts of Bhagalpur and Purnea of Bihar, on the east by Maldah, Murshidabad and Birbhum of West Bengal; on the south by Burdwan of West Bengal and Dhanbad of Bihar, and on the west by Hazaribagh, Monghyr and Bhagalpur of Bihar. This district is the abode of many tribal communities with different stages of economic development. It experienced a few tribal upheavals during the past periods and amongst which the Santal Insurrection of 1855-57 took a very critical form. It resulted in the formation of a separate district in the name of the Santal Parganas. The Act, 37 of 1855 formed the Santali areas into this separate non-regulation district which was placed under the control of the Commissioner of Bhagalpur. It was divided into five jurisdictions and these were administered by the Deputy Commissioner (at Dumka) and four Assistant Commissioners (Datta, 1970: 107-108).
12. The *jal-chal* castes are those from whose hands the Brahmins occupying *sanctum sanctorum* may accept water to drink. The *jal-achal* castes are neither treated as outside the pale of caste nor accepted within the respectable circle of *jal-achals*; there is a group of castes known by the term '*jal-achal*', i.e., from whose hands water is not acceptable. The village society is specially characterized by the interacting patterns of the castes belonging to these spheres.
13. *Chhut* means touchables; the clean castes belong to this category, whereas *achhut* indicates untouchable section which is constituted by unclean castes.
14. Folklore had been identified as a new branch of knowledge in the nineteenth century when the antiquaries in England and philologists in Germany began to investigate into the way of life of the lower classes. Study on human society and culture through age-old customs and traditions is not new. One persuasive approach to folklore studies eschews questions of origin and distribution to concentrate on the role played by folklore in a particular culture. American anthropologists took the lead in this regard. They showed the actual spheres of contributions of folklore to the maintenance of social institutions. Franz Boas was always very careful in collecting folklore data during his all sorts of field expedition. Ruth Benedict made the functional use of folklore during her analysis of the Zuni way of life through mythology. She was of opinion that tribal narratives mirrored the ethnography of culture. But the clearest approach of folkloristic studies in the understanding of culture has come from Bascom, a student of M. Herskovits. Bascom has taken keen interest in expanding the viewpoints of Malinowski in *Myth in Primitive Psychology* and has drawn broad-based-attention to various functional roles of folklore.
15. The lower caste priests of the popular deities are known as *Deyashis*, now sanskritized into *Devamsi*. The *Deyashis* perform all sorts of

ritualistic activities in connection with the village deities and they consider that their works have got divine sanction. In a village where the Brahmin predominates, Brahmin priests are also engaged specially when the offerings are made by any higher class Hindu. "The word 'Deyashi' denotes headman who may be said in a manner to correspond to a justice of peace in South Indian villages" (Thurston, Castes and Tribes in Southern India, Vol. II, 1909, p. 121). In West Bengal villages the *Deyashis* occupy a prominent position in the society and most of the time they are regarded as the saviour of human communities. With the help of supernatural assistance by their side the *Deyashis* are able to tide over the different crises of human life. Naturally, the *Deyashis* are regarded as the most essential factor of village society. Instead of sacred thread worn by the Brahmin priests, the *Deyashis* wear copper rings on their fingers or sometimes copper fillets round the upper arms.

16. Visual anthropology has found a dominant position now-a-days in anthropological research. Photography is a legitimate abstracting process in the sphere of observation. It records everything in detail which can be processed and analysed as per requirement of the investigator concerned. The ethnographers have taken photography as a medium for clearest illustration of culture. The camera documents the data mechanically and it is regarded as a tool of extreme selectivity.

The main advantage of photographic data is that these can be duplicated, enlarged or reduced as per requirements and there are regular ways of harnessing photographic data into different scientific designs. It is for this reason visual anthropological research has been gaining considerable popularity day-by-day.

Regional Perspectives and Traditional Culture

I

WITH a view to proper understanding of the total perspectives of the rural traditions it is necessary to give a brief reference to the geographical environment and historical background of the region concerned. The region of study extends over the south-western tract of Birbhum district and also over a small territory of the north-western part of Burdwan district in West Bengal. The latter tract was originally included in the district of Birbhum and in the year 1806 it ceded to the neighbouring district of Burdwan.

The whole region of study lies between $23^{\circ}32'30''$ and $24^{\circ}35'00''$ north latitude and $88^{\circ}01'40''$ and $87^{\circ}05'25''$ east longitude. The surface of the whole region is characterized by undulations. These undulations are highly marked at the border region of the Santal Parganas district of Bihar. The soil is mostly covered with laterite nodules. There are wide areas where granite veins are seen, there are extensive bleak barren plateaus where nothing can be grown to suit human need. A large area of granite mass is visible at Dubrajpur locality. Here and there the high ridges of laterite are separated by valleys of different width. The larger ridges are very often covered by dense *sal* forests. The region is extended roughly between the rivers Mayurakshi in the north and Ajay in the south. The rolling upland topography in between these two rivers is well-known for its splendour and picturesque type. The region is well-drained by a number of rivers and plateau-streams like

Hinglow, Bakreswar, Sal and Chandrabhaga. All these rivers and streams follow zig-zag course through undulations and forested regions and these are characterized by beautiful landscape with shoals and sandy beds.

The geological features of the region are characterized by Archaean gneiss, Gondwana system, Laterite and older Alluvium. In and around Dubrajpur exposures to gneiss grading to granite form huge blocks which become attractive due to the picturesque pattern. The Gondwana system of rocks is seen at the extreme south-western part of the region on both the banks of the Ajay. It is represented by sandstone, shale and few seams of coal. The whole of the region is provided with ferruginous laterite. It is sufficiently iron-rich and is suitable for using it as iron ore. Formerly, it was largely utilized by the different ancient communities for extracting iron to feed the indigenous iron industry. The Older Alluvium which is constituted by layers of clay, gravel, sand and calcareous *kankar* is seen in the relatively high-level flat territories. Extensive sand depositions are seen along the river beds of the Ajay and the Mayurakshi. The region is specially characterized by existence of a number of hot and cold sulphureous springs. At Bakreswar there are seven hot springs of different temperature ranging from 44°C to 72°C. The water of the Agni Kunda is strongly radioactive. Others are feebly so. Along with hot water different gases are seen to emit, amongst which argon and helium are worth-mentioning. The sources of these springs probably lie along a fissure zone in the granite gneiss. At the vicinity of Rajnagar there is a small stream, known as Tantlai, where a number of hot springs are seen. Not very far from these there is a spot in the midst of paddy fields where a cold spring is seen. It emits cold water with sulphureous smell. This place is known as *Puratan Bakreswar* or Old Bakreswar.

The region is characterized by hot and dry climate. Oppressive hot summer, high humidity and well-distributed rainfall during monsoon are the actual symptoms of the climatic condition of the region. The climate is on the whole healthy.

The fact that the present tract of study possesses considerable antiquity is evident by a large number of materials relating to archeological, geological and historical stand-points. This particular tract has been representing the district as a whole since

time immemorial in various ups and-downs of the country. It was the centre of development of various indigenous trade and industry, it played the main role in the integration of various cultural traits through the ages, and it faced socio-political feuds of variegated nature resulting in the amalgamation of diverse thoughts and ideas specially on social, political and religious perspectives. During the present period this tract of land has become the central spot of various socio-political disturbances for many a time.

The culture of the region concerned dates back to the Early Stone Age which is evident by the discovery of a number of hand-axes at the banks of the Ajay, Hinglow, Bakreswar and Mayurakshi (Dasgupta, 1964: 45). A large number of artifacts belonging to the Late Stone Age have been found at various places of the region like Giridanga, Bakreswar, Chinpai and Hetampur. Patanda, Bhiragarh and Batikar villages have got the credit of presenting Neolithic polished celts (Indian Archaeology: A Review, 1961-62: 59). A few Neolithic-Chalcolithic sites have been discovered with series of Microliths in the neighbouring areas of Dubrajpur. Remnants of black and red ware have been unearthed from Batikar, Mangaldih, Kustikari and other neighbouring villages (Dasgupta, 1963-64: 41). White painted black and red ware, channel-spouted bowl and perforated pottery along with microliths have been discovered from Mandira near Joydev-Kenduli. This particular site is situated near the bank of the Ajay (Indian Archaeology—A Review, 1962-63: 43). A wide-spread Neolithic-Chalcolithic culture stage flourished in the region under study.

The historical perspectives of the region present many important socio-political interactions of the country as a whole and a brief reference of which seems to be essential, in this connection, for having a bird's eyeview of the historical horizon of this tract of land and allied parts. The literary reference of the region under study dates back to the early Jain text—the *Acharanga-sutta*.¹ According to the said text, the twenty-fourth Tirthankara Mahavira travelled over the *vajjabhumi*²—a pathless and rugged region mainly covered by forests. There are evidences that the south-western tract of Birbhum district belonged to *vajjabhumi*. According to some scholars, in the early period, part of the district of Birbhum was included

within the jurisdiction of *Radha*³, and some parts in *vajjabhumi*. The former region was constituted by alluvial plains with a network of rivers, whereas the latter was composed of hard and rocky soil with thick jungles here and there (Majumdar, 1943: 50).

The Mauryan Emperors reigned in the *Radha* part, and it was subsequently included in the Gupta Empire (Majumdar, 1943: 50-51). No actual evidence about the reign of other kings after Harsavardhana in this particular part of the country for a period of about 250 years can be found from the records or otherwise. Then in the tenth century A.D. the region in question was ruled over by the Pala kings who spread their influence all over the country, up to the middle of the twelfth century A.D. The region then passed into the hands of the Sena kings who also ruled the country for long with prowess.

The Muslims came to Bengal during the latter half of the twelfth century A.D. After his conquest of India in the year 1175 A.D., Muhammad Gauri gradually attempted to extend the areas of his direct influence. He was, however, stabbed to death by an assassin in 1206 A.D., following which, one of his favourite slaves, Qutobuddin stratigically acquired the throne of Delhi. He appointed Muhammad Bakhtiyar as Commander-in-Chief. Muhammad Bakhtiyar invaded the city of Gaur and four years after his successful campaign he sent Muhammad Sheran and his brother Ahmad Sheran to occupy Lakhnor (Nagar) with the command of a large army. The Lakhnor or Nagar region, forming the north-western part of the region of our study, was captured by General Muhammad Sheran in 1206 A.D. (Sarkar, 1948: 20).

Nagar was the ancient capital of Birbhum which was established and developed by the Hindu chiefs through the ages. Historical as well as folkloristic materials that are found to be spread in the pages of the books, journals, District Records, etc., and in oral traditions are sufficient to present a well-knit picture of this ancient capital exerting influence over the whole district concerned. It was Bir Singh, the first Hindu king of Birbhum, who established his capital at Birsinghpur, six miles west of Suri. He, along with his two brothers, named Chaitanya Singh and Fateh Singh, arrived at this part of the country from North-West India. It was a remote past period when most

of the area of this part of the country was covered by dense forest which was largely occupied by the Santals. After their first settlement Bir Singh and his brothers began to influence the Santals through various tactful devices and in course of time they were successful in bringing the Santals under their direct control. Ultimately Bir Singh had been able to establish a kingdom and was accepted by the people of the region as their guardian and well-wisher. During the reign of Bir Singh, the whole of Birbhum became the centre of attraction for the people of the surrounding areas, as the said kingdom was well-administered and the subjects of all categories used to lead very peaceful and happy life. The territorial jurisdiction of Birbhum had also been extended, at that time, to Monghyr and Rajmahal in the north, Panchkot in the south, Murshidabad in the east, and Monghyr and Panchkot in the west. But the flourishing capital was suddenly attacked by Ghias-ud-din, the then Subedar of Bengal, and after several cunningful attempts he could capture it. Following the murder of Ghias-ud-din in the next year the son of Bir Singh tried to recapitulate the lost kingdom and he, after taking the title of *Birraj*,⁴ started ruling over the said region. He established his capital at Nagar, eight miles west to the former capital founded by his father. In course of time Nagar took a beautiful look with its well-decorated palace, new buildings, forts, temples, tanks and finely-built roads. Gradually Nagar became recognised as Rajnagar and it bears such name even today (Chakravorty, 1339 B.S.: 57).

Birraj and his descendants reigned here with eclat for a continuous period of 372 years. There are some controversial statements as regards the establishment of Nagar or Rajnagar, which needs a brief reference in this connection. According to some, during twelfth century A.D. when the overlordship of *Radha* passed on to the Sena kings, they built their capital at Birnagar under the jurisdiction of the present Muraroi Police Station in the district. Bijoy Sen was the most powerful and influential king of the Sena Dynasty, who extended his kingdom to a vastly large area, bringing under his sway the whole of *Barendrabhumi*,⁵ *Gaur*,⁶ *Assam*, etc., and he administered his vast territory from the capital of Birnagar in Birbhum (Mitra, 1343 B.S.: 65).

It is said that Lakshman Sen, son of Bijoy Sen, left Birnagar

due to a misunderstanding between him and his father, and went to settle at a place on the southern bank of the river Ajay. Later on, this place was named *Senpahari* or the mountainous tract belonging to the Senas (Oldham, 1894: 19-20). Lakshman Sen was a learned, intelligent and pious king. Many scholars and religious personalities used to attend the Royal Court regularly. He was a true *Vaishnab*⁷ by heart and soul. The famous *Vaishnab* named Joydeva, the composer of most elegant lyric *Gita Govinda*,⁸ was a poet at the court of Lakshman Sena. The poet Joydeva was born and lived at Kenduli, a village on the other side of the river Ajay. In course of time, Lakshman Sena established a city in the neighbouring region of *Senpahari* and named it after him as *Lakhnor*, which ultimately became *Nagar*. At that time the importance of Nagar was recognised by most of the rulers of the country. After having occupied most portions of *Radha*, Ghiyas-ud-din had constructed in the year 1205 A.D. a highway stretching from Devkot in Dinajpur district to Nagar, by which a permanent and easy connection had been established between Gaur and Nagar of Birbhum (Stewart, 1847: 35). But the identification of Lakhnor with Nagar, as put forward by Stewart, had been refuted by Blochman, according to whom it was Lakrakud near Dubrajpur instead (Chakravorty, 1908: 153-58). The renowned historian Sir Jadunath Sarkar accepted the view that Lakhnor and Nagar were the same place (1948: 37).

However, Rajnagar became the famous city of the region in consequence of effective administration and multifarious developmental activities of the Birraj, the last Hindu king, who ruled over the region up to the second half of the Sixteenthth century. But his kingdom was ultimately captured by conspiracy of two Muslim youths whom Birraj loved very much. The life of Birraj was ended during the tremendous hand-to-hand fight with the Muslim youths. It pulled a curtain over the Hindu principality in Birbhum.

Joned Khan, one of the Muslim youths, became the ruler of Birbhum and he lived for a short duration. His son, Ranmast Khan, ascended the throne of Rajnagar and he continued his ruling for 50 years. During his reign this region was blessed with enormous progress in the field of agriculture and other allied affairs. He breathed his last in the year 1659 A.D. when his son

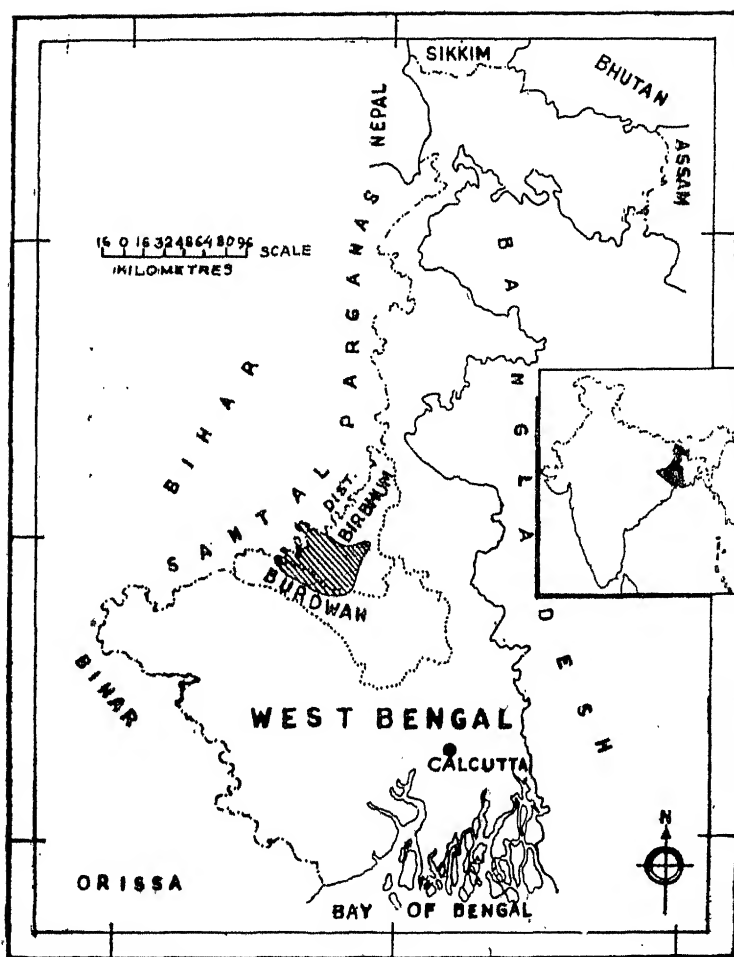


FIG. 2.1 : West Bengal—Showing the Region of Study (The shaded part)

Khwaja Kamal Khan became the ruler of Birbhum. He also took various steps in beautifying the capital city. After his death in 1697 A.D. his son Assadulla took the ruling of Birbhum. As a ruler he was very tactful and noble. He worked throughout his life for the overall improvement of the region and for bestowing Birbhum an honourable position (O'Malley, 1910: 103).

The zamindari of Birbhum, it is stated, first appears as a separate fiscal unit, came into existence at the first half of the eighteenth century. During that period the estate or zamindari was bestowed by Jafar Khan, Nawab of Murshidabad, to Assadulla Khan for administering it as a military fief. The total area of that zamindari was 3,858 square miles which included a vast tract of land. The whole of the present Santal Pargana district was part of the region in question. Assadulla's devotion to duty was really praiseworthy and he was loved and honoured by the people of the region. "The zamindar of Birbhum was a popular and virtuous character, named Assadulla, an Afghan chief, who, with his followers, undertook to defend his territory against the wild mountaineers of Jarcund. This person dedicated half of his income to charitable purposes, either in supporting the religious and the learned, or in relieving the distress of the poor and needy" (Steward, 1847: 31).

His worthy son, Badi-ul-zaman Khan took the charge of Rajnagar and in no time he became very popular amongst the people of the region. During his reign the Hindu and the Muslim subjects received the same treatment. The fierce Maratha invasion took place during this period and due to which not only the Raja of Birbhum suffered immensely, but also the everyday life of the people faced troublesome situations. The Marathas entered this particular region with full force and encamped at Kendua, a place north-west of present Suri railway station. They started pillaging different village communities residing on both sides of the Suri-Raniganj road. Many prosperous villages, such as, Raipur, Kachujor, Satkinuri, etc., suffered severe damage and ultimately became depopulated. In this unbalanced state of the country, Badi-ul-zaman Khan, the then Raja of Birbhum, took every possible step to save the capital of Rajnagar and the people of its surrounding areas. Numerous soldiers had been kept as reserve and they were under strict command to keep a constant watch over the

activities of the Marathas. As a defensive measure, mud-wall or entrenchment was built, which encircled the town for a distance of thirty-two miles. It was twelve to eighteen feet in height and had ditches outside. There were few entrances, called *ghats* which were guarded by *ghatwals* (Hunter, 1876: 151).

But Birbhum could not ultimately be saved from the devastation of the Marathas. The whole region of our study was highly affected by the evil activities of the Marathas. Just after the assassination of Bhaskar Pandit by Alivardi at Mankarh, a place very near to this region, the Maratha pillaging reached its peak under the guidance of Raghuji Bhonsle himself. Different villages of the region were the centres of skilful productions of various commodities relating to the cottage industries. Tantipara village was famous for its high quality silk and tusser industries. The lac industry of Illumbazar at the bank of the river Ajay attracted attention of different merchants throughout the country for its excellence. Regular market centres were developed at Janubazar, Sukhbazar, etc., just beside the river bank. Very near to these places there developed an excellent brass and bell-metal industry at Tikarbeta village. Another village named Hazratpur at the western border of the region also showed skilful activities in the bell-metal industry. Moreover, the whole south-western part of the region was inhabited by the Lohar castes who were the organisers of indigenous iron industry. They used to extract iron from locally available iron ores with the help of large furnaces made by them. The Maratha ravages brought an end to these flourishing village-based trade and industries. All the villages were sacked mercilessly by the Marathas. Most of the villages over the extensive area of the region in question were deserted as the people fled away out of fear (Datta, 1963: 58). Badi-ul-zaman Khan could not take any positive step to resist the Marathas, rather he was very much disturbed by other internal mutinies. He was succeeded by his son, Asad-ul-zaman Khan who began to administer the region. Meanwhile, a change took place in the political situation of Murshidabad. After the death of Nawab Alivardi, his grandson Siraj-ud-daulah ascended the throne of Murshidabad. He faced several troubles relating to the non-cooperation of the powerful zamindars in the country which ultimately rose to an atmosphere of indiscipline. The East India Company also showed

some distasteful attitude in their mode of behaviour. The repairing work of the "Fort William" without the formal permission of the Nawab made him excessively angry with the Company. Siraj-ud-daulah sent a powerful force in reply to that unjust activity. The Englishmen fled away here and there out of fear and the troop of Nawab could easily capture the fort in question. But the East India Company did not sit idle. It was trying every moment to capture the administrative authority of the country by clever tricks. At last the Company became successful, under the leadership of Robert Clive, in defeating the Nawab of Murshidabad in a severe fight at Plassey in the year 1757, which offered the British the long-wanted administrative authority. The battle of Plassey "ushered in a new epoch in the history of Bengal by making the English its virtual masters which helped them gradually to establish their supremacy over the whole of India" (Datta, 1971: 111).

When Mir Jafar Ali Khan ascended the throne of Murshidabad with the direct assistance of Lord Clive and the former passed on the reins of the government to his son, a chaotic condition prevailed in the country due to the revolt of the people against the misbehaviour of the son of the Nawab. In that precarious state of affair, Asad-ul-zaman Khan, the Raja of Birbhum, prepared himself to attack Murshidabad for getting full authority over the whole of Bengal. But that mission could not have been successful due to the interruption of the English settlers who were approached by the wife of Nawab, Mani Begum. A severe fight took place between the parties and the Raja of Birbhum was compelled to retreat. With the help of the Company the Nawab of Murshidabad could defeat the Raja of Birbhum who had to take shelter in the neighbouring forested area away from Rajnagar. The Nawab then took over the charge of Birbhum and Md. Taqi Khan was deputed to collect the revenue. When Mir Kashim, after some time, was restored to the Nawabship, the Raja of Birbhum appealed for returning his lost territory. His appeal was granted accordingly but the Raja could not find himself in the former glory and honour. In the meantime, the East India Company received the *dewani* of Birbhum and ultimately the whole region came under the direct administration of the Company. The Raja became completely powerless.

The year following the taking over of direct charge of Birbhum by the Company experienced a terrible famine which turned the prosperous region into deserted condition. It took a heavy toll on human life and the socio-economic condition of the country reached a very pathetic situation. "The famine that appeared in these places is beyond description and dreadful. Many hundreds of villages are entirely depopulated; and even in large towns there are not a fourth-part of the house inhabited. For want of ryots to cultivate the land, there are immense tracts of fine open country which remain wholly waste and unimproved" (Higgonson's Report, 1771). In that particular situation bands of marauders became active and they started to murder and plunder the people mercilessly at the various parts of the region. These anti-social elements became so powerful that in order to give a check to this wide-spread misdeeds an indirect interference of the Company was essential (Hunter, 1876: 15). In this region the chief manufacturing town, Illumbazar, was attacked and devastated by the dacoits. Then Rajnagar, the capital city, fell under the evil influence of the marauders. The bands of dacoits started to wander about here and there and committed loot and murder indiscriminately. The local people became perplexed and they could not find any way to save themselves and also to protect their loving villages. The Company took some positive steps due to direct interference by the straightforward administrator like Mr. Keating. Immediately military personnel were engaged to root out the evil doers from the region in question. The local people readily welcomed that step and they came forward with all possible co-operation to the British soldiers for the cause of the country. Ultimately, Birbhum was saved from the hands of the marauders but the whole district had to suffer many-sided injuries in its socio-economic life (Hunter, 1876: 64-69).

In course of time the East India Company took initiative in reviving the old industrial units of the district considering their prospects. The silk and *tusser* industries in the region were readily started under the direct supervision of a Commercial Resident who was a representative of the Company. The Company took a number of villages for this trade and the workers in the industry worked on "advanced system". Arrangements had been made by the Company to look after the interest of

these weavers living at various corners of the whole region. A body of troops had been deputed at Illumbazar to protect the weavers from the hands of robbers (O'Malley, 1910: 68). The indigenous iron industry of the region was restarted under the direct initiative of Mr. Farquhar who took over the *Lohamahall* on lease. Mr. Erskine also started indigo production units at Daranda and Illumbazar. The lac industrial unit, established at Illumbazar by the same person, became a very flourishing industry and it, in no time, became famous in India and abroad by its high excellence and skilful productions. Mr. Cheap, the first Commercial Resident of the Company, was a great merchant and renowned manufacturer, "who introduced the cultivation of indigo into the district, improved the system of manufacturing sugar by importing machinery from Europe and set up a mercantile house which continued to function till the end of the nineteenth century" (O'Malley, 1910: 22). However, the Company's initiative in the revival of the village-based industries in the region after a devastating situation was heartily accepted by the people of the region and through these attempts they could get back their means of existence.

The Santal insurrection, which broke out in 1855, is marked with many important socio-economic and political change-overs throughout the whole region. Mention may be made that the Santal insurgents became furious and they conducted active operations over the land and people of the region in question. A large number of villages along with numerous flourishing village-based industries were plundered by them. The '*Hul*'⁹ was started, first of all, in the *Damin-i-Koh*¹⁰ area, almost 40 km, west of the region of study, in consequence of the oppression and fraud committed by the *Dikus* on the Santals. With these various other factors like cheating of the money-lenders, exaction of the landlords, negligence of the administrators and corruption of *amlas* strengthened the root cause of Santal uprising. First of all, the Santal insurgents attacked the rich *mahajans* in and around Burhait, now in Santal Pargana district, following the killing of five local *mahajans* and the *daroga* at the local police station (Datta, 1940: 16). The Santal insurgents then reached this particular region after plundering the villages like Banskuli, Bansra, Muluk, Talbere, Kumrabad, Rampur, Parerpur and Bhandirban, and started their merciless pillaging.

All the villages were burnt to ashes, the village-based industries were destroyed then and there, the crops in the field were ruined. The Santals armed with bows and arrows, swords and axes were running about throughout the whole region with the firm determination of destroying the land and people of the whole country. The people came out leaving their hearths and homes; many were instantaneously killed. Those who were still living, began to roam about here and there to save their lives. It was a dreadful period and the misery of the people knew no bounds.

Those dreadful days passed away long ago. But the tremulous memory of the days gone by are still throbbing in the people's mind which are evidenced by the numerous folk-ballads¹¹ depicting the nature of plunderings and people's reaction on these. A few examples of the folk-ballads, collected from the field directly, would illustrate the point in question. One of the folk-ballads depicts the condition of the villagers on the arrival of the Santal insurgents.

"Dhuklo Bānskuli Kuli Kuli bājāye nākrā
Bānsrā, Muluk, Tālberer lok holo bhāgorā
Bānskuli Kuli Kuli bājāye nākrā
Udāsini Kāmbasini hailo bhāgorā."

(The insurgents entered the village Banskuli beating drums through the village path and due to which the villagers of Bansra, Muluk and Talbere were so much frightened that they readily left their villages. The pillaging of the insurgents on the people of Banskuli was so severe that even the village tutelary deity, Kambasini, fled away from her shrine.)

The insurgents murdered the villagers with axe and sword indiscriminately. The houses were also destroyed. This fact is depicted in the song given below:

"Ghār bāri kuri kuri bhāngley dālān kothā
Kumrobader lokegulosab halo kauchukāta.
Lutley Rāmpur, Kāthipur ār Bedenārayānpur
Pāhār Rājār māti lutli katodur
Parerpurer ghare ghare kātīlo bistar
Bhandirbaner Gopalthakur money peyechen dar."

(A large number of houses including masonry buildings were demolished and then the people of Kumrabad village were attacked and chopped off like the cutting of *kauchu* (arum). Then they engaged in looting Rampur, Kathipur and Bedenarayanpur villages. Their plundering activities were also extended to the jurisdiction of the zamindar of Paha. They entered every household of Parerpur village and killed large number of persons. On these dreadful activities the god Gopal of Bhandirban, a neighbouring village, became panic-stricken.)

All the above villages, which fell prey to the Santal insurgents, are situated either in the periphery or inside the region of study. The villagers felt the frightening atmosphere created by the large-scale insurgency of the Santals. It was a challenge to the British Emperor. Thus the folk-ballad echoes:

“Korley porāmarsa mane harsa muluk mār̥bār lārey
Ingrej mār̥iye āmrā rājya liba kārey.”

(They—the insurgents—decided amongst themselves with cheerful state of mind to extend their authoritative influence over the region and to snatch away the kingdom after killing the Englishmen.)

There are reasons for thinking to that extent. After pillaging the whole western and south-western regions of the district the Santal insurgents assembled at a place near the bank of the river Mayurakshi from where they planned to attack Suri, the headquarters of Birbhum. But readily the then government took action by bringing the affected areas under efficacious administrative control. A large number of troops were sent to give a check to the activities of the Santal insurgents. But the area could not be controlled until the Martial Law was proclaimed and a cordon of outpost, consisting of about 14,000 personnel compelled the Santal insurgents to divert in different directions (Datta, 1940: 83). At this the folk singer sings:

“Sāheb hukum dila, Sāheb hukum dila
fāyār boley, sune sepāigan hajarey hajarey
Santāl mārey tatakshan amni bhāgora hoye,
amni bhāgora hoye purba muye pātāye jāy
Patijore mokāme āsi nāgra bajāy.”

(On getting the order for fire from the Captain the soldiers started shooting down the Santals in thousands. Being faced with this tremendous situation the Santals had to run away towards the eastern part of the country and on reaching the village Patjore they started to beat drums.)

At last the Santal insurrection was subdued. After this the upland tracts of the western part of the district were transferred to the newly-formed district of Santal Parganas.

Thus, the history of the region under study is characterized by many socio-political uprisings, feuds and oppressions. The three events like the Maratha invasion, the assault of the marauders after the devastating famine and the Santal insurrection did a great deal in washing away the organised life and living of the people of the region and in throwing them in a wretched condition. The people of the region fought against their ill fate many a time and with the help of high morale they could get over the gulf of troubles and disasters.

II

A brief reference of the socio-historical perspectives of the different primitive communities is essential in this connection as the various thoughts and ideas around which the folk beliefs and traditions are centered owe largely to the life-ways and thought-ways of the communities in question. There is hardly any doubt that the Santals were the early settlers in this region and they exerted all-round influence in the cultural matrix of this part of the country. It was Buchanan, who, first of all, indicated the settlement of the Santals in the Santal Parganas—Birbhum region. In 1809, he got the evidence of the existence of nearly 500 families of the Santals in Dumka and surrounding region. A large section of the Santals migrated to the Santal

Parganas region in the latter part of the eighteenth century to clear the jungles. Macfarson was of opinion that the migration of the Santals into the Santal Parganas region was effected from Birbhum. Carstairs subscribed to the view that Birbhum was the first area of settlement of the Santals. When Damin-i-Koh was formed in the Rajmahal Hills region, the Santals began to migrate in large numbers and settled there in the midst of hills and forests. In spite of dreadful insurgency amongst the Santals, and large-scale feuds between the Santals and the *Dikus*, a cultural interchange had been effected uninterruptedly between the Santals and the broad-based society of the various Hindu castes and communities. Perhaps this interchange of cultural traits became very much fruitful after the Santal insurrection came to an end. Being compelled to leave the path of violence under the direct pressure of the Martial Law, the Santals decided, in course of time, to lead a peaceful and normal life in association with the neighbours belonging to other communities. On the other hand, the Hindus began to give up the practice of oppressing the simple folk. It was effected mainly due to two-fold reasons : (1) the merciless killing of the Hindu oppressors during the insurgency, and (2) imposition of Martial Law in the affected areas for the maintenance of peace. As a result of long-term intermixture between the Santals and the broad-based Hindu communities in the cultural level, an integrated perspective has been resulted due to the fusion of two traditions through the ages.

The Santals in Birbhum have gained a sense of independence. It has been effected principally due to "the growth of individual ownership of land, and the opening up of new avenues of employment" (Dutta-Majumdar, 1956: 111). A large number of the Santals have been converted to Christianity and naturally they have developed a new perspective of life. The belief and dependency on the *bonga*¹² and other spiritual forces have been loosened to a great extent and nature and extent of marriage and other social functions have witnessed a great change. The converted Santals have got the fair chance to improve their fate through education and in engaging them in various services. The other sections of the Santals, who have maintained the tribal tradition, naturally feel uneasiness and it

has resulted their mental agony. In spite of these phenomena the Santals do maintain the tribal integration.

The original habitat of the Mal Paharias is situated at the Damini region. They have been living in this hilly tract from time immemorial. The scholars differ amongst themselves in respect of origin of the Mal Paharias. Dalton traced their relation with the inhabitants of Malwa. Grierson thought that the word 'Maler' came from the Dravidian word 'Mal' which meant mountain. There is no doubt that the Mal Paharias are a particular branch of the Maler living in Rajmahal hilly tracts. According to a law imposed by the then British Government, in the year 1778, a particular branch of Maler tribe was compelled to live in the plain after leaving its traditional dwellings in hilly tract. In return of their change of habitat they were granted financial help from the government. But that arrangement did not receive any mental support from the Maler tribe as they thought it was derogatory on the part of the plain-living Maler. In course of time the branched off Maler community became separated from the original tribe. There are close cultural similarities between these two communities—the Maler and the Mal Paharias. The latter community, as a natural consequence, became very much provided with Hindu influence. It had been resulted due to their coming down in the plain region where different Hindu castes used to live. The Malers speak in Malto language. The influence of this language is still to be found in the dialect of the Mal Paharias (Sarkar, 1933: 143). It is probable that large sections of the Mal Paharias immigrated to the neighbouring districts of Birbhum, Murshidabad and also in Northern Bengal from the forested region of the Santal Parganas for earning their livelihood. They were very naturally engaged by the zamindar communities to clear up jungles for land reclamation. The industrious and upright Mal Paharias readily won the hearts of their employers. Gradually they had settled at the different parts of the districts and ultimately were mixed up with the local communities. It had been reported in the earlier studies that huge number of Mal Paharias entered Birbhum and allied areas. These Mal Paharias came to the direct influence of Hinduism and in course of time they took up various Hindu thoughts and ideas. Ultimately, they had

been able to find a place in the social ladder of the Hindu castes and communities. According to Beverly, the Mal caste of Birbhum is the Hinduized section of the Mal Paharias (1953: 74). Amongst all the districts of West Bengal, Birbhum possesses the highest concentration of Mal caste. The process of Hinduization of the Mal Paharias took place extensively in the soil of Birbhum the immediate plain land by the side of the hilly tract of the Santal Parganas. The principal occupation of the Mals is agricultural labour. Women engaged themselves in small scale fishing in tanks, rivers and ditches. A section of this caste took the profession of snake charming and wander about here and there like nomadic communities. A number of tribal beliefs and practices are seen to have exerted their influence in the present-day religious sphere of the Mals. The introduction of Brahmin priest in the religious practices has not yet been made, and so the process of sanskritization has not been completed in its totality. But the trend of sanskritization¹³ has been working actively amongst various communities in the region from time immemorial up to the present day. The sanskritization of the Bauris may be taken as a case in point. The original profession of the Bauris was palanquin bearing and they used to get an important status as palanquin-bearers. But they were compelled to give up their traditional occupation with the changing time and had taken to agricultural labour as their means of subsistence. The life and activities of the Bauri caste reflect many tribal thoughts and ideas. Their religious life is largely characterized by Hindu and tribal deities. The office of the priest is maintained by the men of their own caste. The Bauri priest or *Deogharia* performs all religious activities for the caste as a whole. A large section of the Bauri caste living in the south-western region of the district came under the direct influence of sanskritization through the ceremonial taking of a Brahmin priest within the community. In 1948, a conference of the Bauris, named Bahubir Sammelan, was held at a village named Kankhartala. The Bauris from 27 villages in the Birbhum and Santal Parganas districts actively participated in the conference. The newly appointed Brahmin priest worshipped the goddess Kali organised by the Bahubir Sammelan and he promised in presence of all the Bauris to devote himself for the welfare of the Bauri community, and

in all socio-religious performances he would officiate with due seriousness. The Bauris accepted him in a body as their priest and they took an oath before the deity to protect him from all sorts of troubles which might have cropped up due to his acceptance of Bauri *jajmanship*. The Bauris, influenced by sanskritization, began to think themselves socially superior to other sections and they, as a natural consequence, followed higher Hindu traditions in their day-to-day life. In the religious sphere various non-Vedic deities were forced to disappear and the deities from the Hindu pantheon were embraced to mould the indigenous tradition.

The process of Hinduization had been conspicuous in the life of the Lohar, another Hinduized caste with great numerical strength living in the region. The Lohars are regarded to have been emerged out of the combination of diverse identical communities engaged in indigenous iron smelting. The region concerned is rich in iron ores. These were extensively exploited by these Lohar communities, and at that period, they found a strong basis of economic existence. The iron industry of that period was out and out village-based and small furnaces with various technicalities were prepared by the iron-smelters. In most of the villages in the region the remains of that old iron industry are still to be seen. Different destroyed furnaces have been unearthed, the remains of iron slags are still to be found dumped here and there. But the flourishing indigenous iron industry received a set-back due to the establishment of a few large-scale iron and steel industries in the country. As a necessary consequence an abrupt change came into the life and activities of the Lohars and they were forced to give up the tradition-bound iron smelting to take up the employment as agricultural labours in the region. At present the Lohar caste as a whole is recognised as agricultural labours. They could recollect nothing about their former traditional occupation and their customs and traditions have been moulded to fit the changed situation. They claim similar social status as enjoyed by the Mals. They are served by Brahmin priest. The religious pantheon of the Lohars is crowded by different non-Vedic and Vedic deities. But in some cases the influence of indigenous religious pattern is seen to be conspicuous.

The Bagdis constitute not only the largest population of

the region but also this caste is regarded as a dominant one in respect of various socio-economic aspects. The life of the Bagdis is inextricably interwoven with the ups and downs of the country. They were the regular employees of the then *rajas* and zamindars for protecting the respective territories from foreign attacks which were very much prevalent during those periods. They actively participated in the different indigenous uprisings which took place during the British regime. The famous Sardar and Paik revolts¹⁴ which occurred throughout the south-western region of West Bengal were largely organized by the Bagdis. The Bagdis of this region are largely agricultural labours. Women are extensively engaged in fishing in ditches and rivers. The Hinduization of Bagdis has reached the maximum level and they have found a better position in the social ladder of the Hindus. Their religious life is largely influenced by the dominant Hindu tradition though, at times, they worship a few non-Vedic deities¹⁵ which reflect their aboriginal standpoint. From long time past they have been enjoying the service of the Brahmin priest and in this affair the Bagdis are to be regarded as pioneer. The goddess Manasa is taken as their tutelary deity and during the worship of the deity a number of indigenous and non-Vedic items are seen to be prominent in spite of their overall embracement of Hindu tradition. The composition pattern and singing of *Manasajat*¹⁶ or rhymes composed in the praise of the goddess Manasa reflect numerous non-Vedic traditions which have no direct connection with the Hindu beliefs and ideas. The Bagdis are regarded as experts in the singing of *Manasajat*. In spite of this fact, the Bagdi way of life has been extensively influenced by the great Hindu tradition.

The Doms, though occupy the lowest rung in the Hindu social ladder, have got a bright background in the socio-political life of the region. The Doms were the martial group of the country, who were engaged many a time to save the country's freedom. They used to employ themselves extensively in the military force of the locality governed by the then *rajas* and zamindars. In this region the Doms were engaged as *lathials* who used to guard the territory under the local chiefs. From the very boyhood days it was essential for them to train themselves in the playing with *lathis*. They used to enjoy

rent-free land as their remuneration. The Doms are divided into a number of sub-groups and these have been named after their actual activities. The Mridha Doms work in the burning *ghats* and help the people to cremate the dead bodies following regular customs. The Ankur Doms engaged in basket-making, while the Bajune Doms work as musicians. A section of the Doms has been upgraded to a considerable extent and they work as priests of the Dharma-thakur, extensively found throughout the region. They are known as Dharma Pandits.

There cannot be any denying of the fact that the Doms took over the heavy responsibility to save the border regions of the country. In course of time, specially in consequence of the establishment of British rule in this country, the service so far rendered by them was not recognised and the Doms had been uprooted from their time-long profession. The Doms belonging to this region had developed and nurtured a dance pattern locally known as *Raibenshe*. It was a kind of war dance. In all its essential stages courage, strength of arms and quickness of eye dominated characteristically. "*Raibenshe* was a corruption of the word *Rai-benshe* and that the *Raibenshe* dancers were in their dance and acrobatics carrying on the martial tradition of *Raibenshe* soldiers of Bengal" (Dutt, 1924: 25). The *Raibenshe* dancers were largely found in the villages like Gohaliara, Tantipara and Chandrapur in the northern tract of the region. *Raibenshe* dance tradition was patronized by the local zamindars as these heterogeneous communities were united together through the whirling of the royal bamboo or *Rai bansh* and thereby keeping the enemy and foreign invaders away from the border regions. During the British period these dancers were chased many a time and due to long indifference as well as want of patronage the age-old *Raibenshe* dance pattern gradually became dwindled. For some time the local well-to-do people used to call the *Raibenshe* troupes to show their feats during the marriage ceremonies of their sons and daughters. But it could not keep that dance recital alive. In course of time the *Raibenshe* dance characterized by the local cultural traditions and high excellence became extinct.

The two other castes, viz., the Muchis and the Hadis, though occupying the lowest rung in the Hindu social ladder, are not insignificant in the development of particular cultural perspective

of the region. The traditional occupation of the Muchis are tanning and shoe-making. Some of them work as musicians. During the present period a large section of them has taken to agricultural labour. A reform movement took place in the recent past when the Muchis belonging to a large number of villages of the region went through a purificatory ceremony. During this time an oath was taken by all of them in favour of giving up the work of leather-dressing and the eating of beef. With the detachment of these two impure practices the Muchis claim a better position in the Hindu social ladder. A section of them are served by the degraded Brahmins. The Muchis worship a few indigenous deities like Sitala, Jalka Devi, etc. As a menial and scavenging caste the Hadis are well-known. There are many sub-divisions, each of which work in various spheres like removal of nightsoil, palanquin-bearing, playing of music, etc. The women are traditional mid-wives and through this profession they have been serving the people of the locality in their essential need from time immemorial. Amongst the various subcastes the Bhumali is dominant in this region, and almost all of them have been engaged in the various activities relating to agriculture. They are very commonly served by the degraded Brahmins. Their religious sphere is dominated by the indigenous deities like Chandi, Sitala, Manasa, etc. The famous folk deity Chandi seems to have been patronized by the Hadis. Chandi was identified as the daughter of a Hadi (*Hadir jhi Chandima*) by the erudite scholar of folk literature like D.C. Sen. He has stated that "the Hadis, in olden times, used to perform priestly functions in some of the Kali temples, and they even do so now in some parts of Bengal" (1920: 90-91).

The Koras constitute a small population in the region. They contributed some essential features to the total culture of the region. The Koras are regarded as the offshoots of the Mundas of Chhotanagpur. Being faced with hardship in their daily life they started immigrating to the different adjoining districts of West Bengal. After coming to the district of Birbhum these people began to engage themselves in earth-cutting in which they regarded themselves as experts. Ethnologists are of opinion that the Koras are constituted by the different tribal communities who spread throughout the length and breadth of the country and earned their livelihood by digging of earth. The

very profession, *i.e.*, earth-digging gave the name Kora to the whole section of the people concerned. The Koras have proved their ability in the earth-digging work in the region and they are specially called by the local people at the time of any large-scale excavation of tanks, *dighis*, etc. In addition to this special profession the Koras, in the region, are found to associate themselves in the works of cultivation mainly in the form of daily labourer. The Koras, whatever may be their origin, have totally assimilated in the local culture of the region and the trend of sanskritization in them has been effected to a considerable extent. On reaching this tract the Koras came in direct contact with the various Hindu castes, on the one hand, and they had to receive negligence from their original stock in the homeland, on the other. These two factors accelerated the process of Hinduization in the life of the Koras. The Koras worship a number of Hindu gods and goddesses in addition to their indigenous deities. They are served by the Brahmin priest and participate actively in the Hindu feasts and festivals.

The culture of the region is largely characterized by the life and activities of the communities like the Santal, Mal Paharia, Bauri, Lohar, Mal, Bagdi, Dom, Muchi, Hadi and Kora. They represent the folk substratum of the region and in most of the folk cults the traditions of these primitive communities are greatly reflected and their representations are extensively seen during the organization of these cults on regional level. The life and activities of these primitive groups were totally conditioned by the topographical and ecological setting of the region, and in course of time they had developed an overall philosophy of their own which very naturally conditioned the cultural perspective of the region. The folk cults centering round village deities present numerous examples of direct contributions of these communities and at times it is felt that these are moulded by their life-ways and thought-ways. During the long-term process of Aryanization,¹⁷ Hinduization and Brahminization¹⁸ in this region just after the arrival of advanced communities, everything relating to the way of life of the region were challenged abruptly. In spite of the smaller cultural clashes, the little traditions of the primitive communities were being influenced by the great traditions of the migrated advanced groups of people. Ultimately, it was seen that most of the

important folk cults and other significant features of life were thoroughly 'purified' by the infliction of Hindu thoughts and ideas. Therefore, the situation demands that in order to throw discernible light on the land and life, traditions and customs of this region in question special stress should be given to the roles played by these primitive communities who still exert conspicuous influence on the philosophy of life of the region concerned.

III

An overall exposition of the cultural patterns and traditions of the people of the region under study deserves special mention in order to get a full view of life. But our discussions and analyses would naturally be restricted to the cultural patterns and traditions that have been developed in the sphere of religious and socio-religious activities. The cults of the village deities being the central theme of our study should be understood in the direct background of the religious traditions and cultural interminglings amongst diverse religious factions through the ages. With a view to throw discernible light on the interacting patterns of different religious traditions a brief but systematic picture, in relation to these, has been presented in the following lines:

The region under study has been largely influenced by various religious movements and the people belonging to all sections have had to share, directly or indirectly, these feuds and encounters of different dimensions. In the sphere of religion the feuds became conspicuous throughout the region from time immemorial. There was a time when the region and other tracts of the district of Birbhum were highly influenced by the Buddhist thoughts and ideas. Some centres of Buddhist culture have been unearthed in the northern parts of the district. Baragram village presents a large number of Buddhist deities advocating for the fact behind the development and spread of Buddhist religious thoughts and ideas in the said locality. During the reign of Sasanka the Buddhism began to establish in the region extending over the south-western part of Bengal and it continued lavishly up to the Pala Dynasty. There are a few instances in this part of the country which support the

presence of strong Buddhist organization in the remote past. The case of Dharmaraj—a popular folk deity in the region under study—deserves special mention in this connection. Many scholars are of opinion that the Dharmaraj is nothing but a concealed Buddhist god. He was extensively worshipped by the Buddhists who dominated over the length and breadth of the region and after their sudden fall the God in question took transformation into the fold of folk religion or the religious thoughts and ideas of the common people (Shastri, 1894: 134). But this view has, in recent time, been strongly opposed by most of the scholars. Whatever may be the case of the Dharmaraj, as regards his connection with Buddhist pantheon it can easily be taken for granted that the existence of various stone images of Buddhist deities in the different villages so far unearthed, claims the spread of Buddhism here. A section of the Buddhists was very much hostile to the Hindus and the former began to hate the latter religious group. The name of that particular Buddhist faction was the Vajrayanists,¹⁹ who, in course of time, became so inimical that they started depicting the Hindu gods and goddesses as the menials and carriers of the Buddhist deities (Bhattacharya, 1924: 130). This particular spiteful attitude of the Vajrayanists probably became severe specially during the period of terrible downfall of the Buddhism (Ghosh, 1957: 168). It was the middle of the twelfth century A.D., when the Muslims entered the locality and after their political conquest they began to take the golden opportunity of the waning Buddhism as a stepping stone to launch large scale conversion of the people into Islam (Bhattacharya, 1975: 117-18). Under the direct sponsorship of the Muslim rulers many Islamic missionaries took up the programme of Islamization of the people. Those organizations readily became successful due to the influence of the ruling community, on the one hand, and the hatred and neglect of the Hindus in the helpless condition of the Buddhists, on the other. A large number of Buddhist villages had to embrace Islam to protect themselves from ill-fated condition in consequence of the decline of the Buddhism. The Hindus, who were more or less dominated over the area, did not become inactive during the process of Islamization; rather they started to engulf all the Buddhist deities, legends, etc., encrusting Hindu thoughts and ideas over these. They

went to the extent of depicting Buddhist deities, rituals and ceremonies through the intellectual coverings of the Ramayana and Mahabharata in order to show that those were nothing but parts of Hindu thoughts and ideas. In this way the Buddhism lost its identity in the whole area.

This part of the country is highly characterized by the interaction of the three sects of Hinduism—the Vaisnava, Saiva and Sakta.²⁰ These three distinct factions possess different sets of beliefs and ideas. The innate philosophy of one may differ from the other and sometimes one goes against the other. There were wranglings of various nature, one faction wanted to root out the other. People supporting one faction did not hesitate to launch a regular movement against the person following the modes of behaviour of the other faction. The feuds and internal discords took place on a large scale over the region under study. A considerable number of evidences that have been keeping their existence in the temples, in shrines under the trees, in an open field and in the life and activities of the people support the view. Just after the decline of Buddhism, the Hinduism began to spread its influence despite the attempts of the Islam prophets in large scale conversion to Islamic religious faith. At the very outset, the Sakta sect started its activities and in no time it began to dominate the land and people of the region. The presence of five famous Saktapiths²¹ and other popular Sakta centres inside and at the peripheral parts of the region strongly establish the development and spread of Sakta culture throughout the region. The Saktapithas of Bakreswar, Nandipur, Kankalitala, Nalhati and Labpur and other Sakta centres like Tarapith, Loba, Birsingpur, Rasa, Shyamrupargarh, etc., have maintained their tradition from time immemorial. There are evidences that these Sakta-dominated places came to the limelight at one time due to the possession of highly influential deities and powerful ritualism of their propitiators. But the large-scale transgressive activities of the patrons of Sakta sect made the general people very much worried. The horrified activities in the way of propitiation of the deities by the Sakta *gurus* could not attract the people; rather they began to distract from that very path followed by the Sakta *gurus* and their close associates. At that very moment the celebrated appearance of Jaydeva as a famous Vaisnava poet through his epoch-making lyrical work entitled Gita

Govinda where "Profane Love has been sublimated into Divine Love" (Chatterji, 1973 : 54). Jaydeva flourished during the second half of the twelfth century A.D. and as a court poet of Lakshmana Sena, the last Hindu king of Bengal, he could establish himself at the peak position. The main theme of Jaydeva's work and meditation was centered round the celebrated love affairs of Radha and Krishna and his sole intention was to explore everything through ideal of love and mutual understanding (Chakravorty, 1323 B.S. : 206). It gave the people necessary comfort and confidence specially those, who became bewildered by the terrible and transgressive activities of the Sakta mode of life. The centre of Jaydeva's activities is still to be seen at the southern part of the region of study. "The memory of Jaydeva by name as the author of the Gita Govinda has been kept green for nearly eight hundred years by means of the annual popular *mela* or fair in the village of Kenduli on the Ajay river in Birbhum district" (Chatterji, 1973 : 7). Not very far from this site another famous Vaisnava poet, Chandidas, suddenly made his appearance. His overnight transformation from a rigid Sakta believer to a Vaisnava thinker though apparently made an anomalous situation in the religious sphere of the region, yet it gradually received conspicuous position because of the particular philosophy evolved and nurtured by Chandidas through divine wish. Chandidas, through his sweet lyrics composed systematically in the Vaisnava *padavali*, asked the people to approach the God in a way processed by love for all. The Vaisnavic thoughts and ideas patronized by these two mystic poets of love as well as saints reached all corners of the region and the people began to embrace this sweet and softened way of approaching the gods and thereby getting divine blessings. In course of time it so happened that the flood of love in the background of the celebrated activities of the divine lovers—Radha and Krishna—ultimately inundated the whole country and many people came forward to get relief from terrific activities of the Sakta saints and *gurus*. A few villages in the region, viz., Jophla, Bhandirban, Mainadal became conspicuous due to the development of Vaisnava schools of thoughts sponsored by the famous Vaisnava *pandits* like Jnandas, Jagadananda, Lochandas, Akinchandas and others (Mitra, 1936 : 207). Village Ekchakra, situated at the periphery of the region of study, was blessed with the advent of

Shree Nityananda--the chief disciple of Lord Chaitanya. The direct influence of these towering personalities in the sphere of development and spread of Vaisnavite thoughts did a good deal in reorienting the formerly strong Sakta organization. It was seen that in many places the Shyamā of Sakta cult had received a covering or at least few dominant characters of Shyamā of Vaisnava cult. There is a good number of villages in this region where the Sakta deity—Kali—is being worshipped through Vaisnava way of thought. The Sakta Kali has received a transformation into Vaisnava Kali and ultimately no distinctions are marked between the two spheres of approaches (Kinsley, 1975 : 154-55). This transformation has been effected through the replacement of black colour of the Kali by sky-blue colour of Krishna; the fierce expression of the face of the deity has been softened as an emblem of love and affection. The mother goddess has been made to refrain from taking the blood of animals dedicated through animal sacrifice. The Vaisnava ideal which is characterized by love for all provides accommodation to each and every follower of other religious factions. It was because of that fact many Vaisnava households of repute could make arrangements without any hesitation, for worshipping the Sakta deities side by side with the deities of their own line of religious thinking. In this region it was seen in the past days that Raja Birchandra, a famous Hindu zamindar and a real Vaisnava at that time, used to worship the Sakti image in the temple specially constructed for the Vaisnava god,—the Vishnu, his family deity. Raja of Kachujore, another Vaisnava and influential zamindar of the time, felt no hesitation to worship the goddess Kali and god Gopal—the two deities belonging to two different opposite factions—within the same temple (Mittra, 1938 : 52). The behaviour-pattern of these dominant zamindars in respect of showing due regard to all beliefs and practices irrespective of factions and internal divisions based on differences of opinions largely influenced the common people who began to view the various religious factions in an accommodative spirit and mutual understanding.

Saivism also found a suitable atmosphere to spread its influence on the life and activities of the people. Bakreswar and Baidyanath Dham were the two effective centres of Saivite thoughts and ideas. There were other Saivite centres in the

region and the most important of those were Bhandirban (Bhandedwar Siva), Bhingarh (Bhimeswar Siva), Dubrajpur (Pahareswar Siva), Kaleswar (Keleswar Siva), Khagra (Khageswar Siva) and Rasa (Anadinath Siva). Numerous folk tales and oral traditions in connection with these Sivas indicate their direct influence on the life of the people. There are many occasions when these temples are overflowed by the devotees from far and near places. During the *gajan*²² festival on Chaitra Sankranti, i.e., last day of the month of Chaitra (March-April) village-level rites and ceremonies are observed when people belonging to all castes and classes actively participate in the various phases of the festival. At times caste and class barriers fall and the people become united to offer their heartfelt devotion to Lord Siva. Most of the villages of the region are in possession of Siva as their tutelary deity—sometimes villages are being named after the name of that particular Siva residing in the village. During the flourishing period of Saivism in the region the Dharamraj—the famous folk deity with non-Aryan origin—had been identified as the Siva to some extent and many Brahminical rites and rituals were processed in the ritualistic performances of Dharmaraj.

In this way the three different internal factions—Saiva, Sakta and Vaisnava—belonging to the Great Hindu Tradition exerted their direct influence on the people of the region during the different periods. Sometimes these three, in course of their working in the socio-cultural setting of man, had lost their distinctiveness and became a single unit to help people in tiding over crises in their daily life. There are many evidences when the Great Tradition of Hindu religion came in direct contact with the Little Tradition of the indigenous religious system and all of these have been fused to form a composite whole depicting interchange of various internal traits. The religion in question is regarded as the fusing pot of diverse religious beliefs and ideas where manifold religious atmosphere characterized by even opposite beliefs and practices had created a unique perspective of mutual understanding and unconditional accommodation. The age-old religious centre at Bakreswar provides such a fruitful field where all the three factions of Great Hindu Tradition, together with the Little Folk Tradition, have been intermingled. Being situated more or less at the central part of the region of

study Bakreswar is encircled by large number of small and large villages with many folk deities as well as various gods and goddesses of the Hindu religion. Mention may be made that the folk deities found in these villages still preserve their original non-Aryan traditions in almost all of their modes of behaviour. People belonging to the lower sections of the society actively participate in the festivals of the deities and most of them are served by the non-Brahmin priests. Nine out of ten villages studied in this region fall at the vicinity of Bakreswar. The tenth village is to be found near the famous Vaisnava centre at Jaydev-Kenduli—22 km south of Bakreswar. The name Bakreswar indicate the existence of the Lord Siva in this village. It is a well-known Saiva centre and it has got proper reference in the earliest literature like Pithamala-Mahatantra. Bakreswar is famous for having Bakranath Mahadeva and other five Sivalingas of repute—Kubereswar, Siddheswar, Jyotirlingeswar, Rudreswar and Jambheswar. At the same time Bakreswar is provided with the valuable materials of Sakta influence. This place is regarded as one of the 51 *pithas* (sanctuaries) of the Sakta sect. This religious centre is recognized as the celebrated place where the middle portion of the eye-brow ridges of the goddess Sati fell after Dakshyayajna. The deity established here is known as Mahisamardini Durga. There are two other famous temples inside this sacred campus where the goddess Kali is regularly worshipped. Just by the side of the temples of Siva and Sakti there is a sacred banyan tree, known as Akshyabat³, at the foot of which the goddess Shasthi, a goddess of non-Aryan origin, is believed to reside. At the vicinity of Akshyabat a *pipal* tree is found and under which there is a big altar where the image of Radha and Madhab is found in an eternal embracing posture. Besides these, a high platform under a *neem* tree (*Margosa indica*) has been marked as the rest place of Nityananda, the great Vaisnava ascetic, where he is said to have taken rest for some time during his celebrated tour over a vast tract of land for the preaching of Vaisnava thoughts and ideas. Therefore, it is seen that the Bakreswar religious centre is provided with the deities as well as beliefs and ideas of Saiva, Sakta and Vaisnava factions together with Shasthi—the goddess belonging to the folk tradition. The hot and cold springs found inside this religious centre are thoroughly covered by various myths and oral

traditions which indicate both *shastric* as well as indigenous beliefs attitude system. The cold spring of the Bakreswar religious centre is provided with such a belief that the childless women would be blessed with child if they take bath in it and find out a portion of fruits, betel-nut and other *puja* materials from the bottom of the tank. The water of the spring is said to have been provided with fertility power. Other hot springs have got different perspectives and functions of their own which are totally connected with the mythological aspects of the Hindu religion. In addition to various sacred dates huge number of people belonging to diverse castes and classes assemble at Bakreswar during *Sivaratri*²⁴ ceremony and they, according to their own line of thinking worship and/or show their respect to the deities and various other effective media. Therefore, in Bakreswar religious centre, a blending of sanskritic and folk beliefs are found to be combined. It provides ample opportunities for integration and assimilation of diverse beliefs and ideas of the people belonging to the Great and Little Traditions (Sarkar, 1976 : 24).

In the overall life of the region many concrete evidences have been and are being found in respect of synthesis of religious beliefs belonging to two different spheres, viz., the Hindu and the Islam. There are many *pirasthans*²⁵ at the different corners of the region where a large number of Hindu devotees pay their regular homage and ask for blessings from the Muslim saint or *pir*. There is a famous *pirasthan* at Patharchapuri village, 12 km north-east of Bakreswar, which depicts as a symbol of Hindu-Islam religious integration. The great Muslim saint Data Saheb was born in that village and he used to love all people irrespective of any caste, class and religion. He did not discriminate between Hindu and Islam. He had easy access to all the families of the region and everybody used to pay due regard for his different mystic activities. On the 11th day of the month of Chaitra (March-April) a great fair is held at Patharchapuri village in front of the *majar*²⁶ of Data Saheb when the devotees belonging to Hindu and Muslim communities attend the various performances that are observed in the sweet and glorious memory of the Muslim saint. Thus, the religious atmosphere of the region in question is characterized by high qualities of tolerance, compromise and sufferance. This particular trend has, in course of time, given rise to assimilation of various traits in the overt and

covert aspects of religious faiths belonging to different sects and factions.

These religious intermixtures have found a very suitable medium to develop in their strict sense of the term amongst the Baul communities in the region. The Bauls are the living embodiment of integrated pattern of culture and traditions and they contribute greatly to the overall development of the folk culture of the region. The Bauls constitute a particular community and they can be described as a cultural and religious nomad among the peasant *bourgeoisie* of Bengal (Bhattacharya, 1969 : 23). They do not follow any rigid system of the society—they do not believe in the caste system. And also they dislike to cling to any religious sect. People from both Hindu and Muslim communities may be the followers of the Baul ideal of life. The Bauls coming from Hindu community are generally Vaisnavite in their faith, and those coming from Muslim community bear sufiistic idea and in both the schools the emphasis is on the mystic conception of divine love (Dasgupta, 1946 : 183). The Bauls wander about through the village path, in the open fields and on the banks of the rivers to seek the *maner manush*²⁷ or 'Men of the Heart' who is the divine spirit living in each human body. The philosophy of the Baul sect is deep-rooted in the system of self-realization. The secret truth of this self-realization can be understood and felt by intuition especially when the body is purified and the love for the beloved one rises so high that all the feelings of worldly happenings are totally lost. During this time the body reaches the state of near death. This is known as *jyante marā*²⁸ or death while the body is living. This deep spiritual experience of the Bauls are expressed through their melodious songs sung in the accompaniment of some characteristic musical instruments like *ektara*, *anandalahari* and *dotara*. The Baul attempts to clear everything through his songs composed and sung by him. These songs are dedicated at the feet of the Ultimate Being who is believed to live in the body of man. Various words in the songs are used in an ambiguous way so that the common people may understand the apparent meaning. But the real deep-rooted meaning of these can be explained through the spiritual basis of life and activities constituting the *sadhana* of the Bauls conducted through the teachings of the *guru*. The Baul songs form the core of the folk song of

the region under study. These are to be heard everywhere and all through the time over the extensive area of the region. The Baul songs can be listened in the lonely field, at the road-side tea stall of the village and also in the crowded bus stand of the town. But these songs have found their sweetest expressions through idealistic atmosphere during the famous age-old fair held in the memory of the Vaisnava poet Jaydeva at Kenduli village. This great fair is highly characterized by the cultural perspectives of the region (Sarkar, 1977 : 3-4). The assemblage of large number of Bauls and their three-day stay in the fair changes the total atmosphere of the region. Baul songs are sung spontaneously throughout the day and night at the numerous centres, specially created for the purpose. The devotees mainly Vaisnavites come to pay their homage to Jaydeva-propitiated Radha-Madhab and after which they participate in the *mahotsab* or great festival relating to *annasatra* or charitable supply of rice as well as listen to Baul songs to their hearts' content. The Baul culture of Birbhum, which flourished on the bank of the river Ajay at the holy place of Jaydeva's meditation, has attracted many scholars, litterateurs, theologists through the ages and they have taken valuable materials from Baul way of life to focus various spheres of knowledge. This particular culture developed in the soil of the region concerned and it nourished by the air and water of this particular tract.

Thus, the cultural landscape of the region under study is criss-crossed by various processes of conflict and cohesion, dissociation and association, compromise and competition amongst different socio-ritual thoughts and ideas. But the general trend of these interactions was centred round the development of new and novel state of affairs in which all the constituent materials received a changed condition. Sometimes these had to receive such a remoulded shape that it was very difficult to recognise these in the background of their original form. The day-to-day life and activities of the people of the region were highly influenced by those changing situations through various patterns of socio-ritual interactions. The historical transformations of cults in consequence of the change of time are of much importance in the study of a region (Warbner, 1977 : xi). Ultimately those changes have been reflected in the mode of behaviour of the people and this particular situation is being maintained.

specially in the ritualistic sphere despite different major socio-economic and political change-overs at different times as have been pin-pointed elsewhere in this work (Redfield, 1941 : 229). The folk culture of the region which is highly illustrated by the socio-ritual interactions, substantially influenced by the Great and Little Traditions, has found a suitable place of its thriving and getting shelter at the different shrines of village deities which have been acting as effective media for meeting various challenges of social life. On this ground the attempt of exposition of the internal workings underlying socio-cultural perspectives of the people of the region through the organized modes of behaviour that are reflected in the cults of the village deities would be efficacious to a considerable extent.

The ritualistic activities are regarded as highly expressive in the understanding of various facets of life; and religion, in different forms and patterns, fulfils the basic functions of exploring inner recess of human life. It is an accepted view that the religious concepts spread beyond their specially metaphysical contexts to provide a framework of general ideas in terms of which a wide range of experience—intellectual, emotional, moral—can be given meaningful form” (Geertz, 1977 : 40). Therefore, “the study of religion must not disregard the cultural context but has to refer to its situational character and significance” (Dupre, 1974 : 255). A broad-based study of folk religion has, therefore, been presented here to visualize the cultural matrix of the rural folk in its proper perspective.

NOTES

1. It is one of the twelve *angas* of the celebrated Jain religious ideas. Acharanga is considered as the oldest of the *angas*. It is divided into two books known as the *Sutraskandhas*. These two books are marked by conspicuous differences. The style and way of life that have been referred in these two books differ in basic considerations. These are written in both prose and poetry. Their main intention is to focus the mode of life or *acara* of the Jain clergy. These are regarded as the celebrated teachings of Mahavira to one of his disciples, Sudharman. He afterwards transmitted them orally to his disciple Jambu.
2. It was a part of *Radha*. In Acharanga Sutra there is a fine Prakrit ballad which depicts a picture that Mahavira wandered for sometime as a naked mendicant in Ladha, of which Vajjabhumi and Sumbha-

bhumi were apparently two divisions. Ladha is regarded as a pathless country. The natives were very rude who maltreated the ascetics. When they found the ascetics, they were in regular habit of calling their dogs to set them upon the *Samanas*. It is mentioned in the Jain religious texts that many recluses lived in Vajjabhumi where they were bitten by dogs and cruelly treated in different other ways. Many recluses used to carry bamboo staves to keep off the dogs from them.

3. The country lying roughly between the western bank of the Bhagirathi and the hills of Chhotanagpur and the Santal Parganas washed by the Damodar, Ajay and Mayurakshi is known by the term *Radha*. This, in turn, is divided in *Uttar Radha* and *Dakshin Radha*, i.e., northern and southern sections.
4. The royal title taken up by the rulers of Birbhum, the literal meaning of which is the valiant king.
5. The northern part of Bengal.
6. The exact location of the ancient city of Gauda and of the kingdom which bore this name is not known. Panini referred the city of Gaudapura and Gauda, as the name of a country, occurs in the *Arthashastra* of Kautilya. It is stated in an inscription of the middle of the sixth century A.D. that the Maukhari King Isanavarman forced the Gaudas to seek refuge in the sea. It is, no doubt, an indication of the fact that Gauda probably extended up to the sea coast (Majumdar, 1971: 6-7). In *Brihat Samhita* of Varahamihira it is seen that the Gauda territory is distinguished from Paundra (North Bengal), Tamralipika (in Midnapur district) as well as from Vanga and Samatata (South-East Bengal). Gauda and Vanga are sometimes used side by side. The location of Gauda is indicated in the Bhavishya Purana which defines Gauda as an extended area lying to the north of Burdwan and south of Padma.
7. The special devotees of Vishnu in his various forms or *avatars* (incarnations). The basic principle of this creed is *bhakti* or personal devotion to God with an intensity of emotion akin to conjugal love. This religious pattern has its antiquity but Chaitanya made it a reality by his direct teachings to the masses of Bengal and Orissa.
8. The celebrated love-lyric written by the Vaisnava poet and devotee Jaydeva. It contains in a lucid lyric the eternal love that developed round Radha and Krishna. The Vaisnava poets headed by Jaydeva placed themselves in the position of the *sakhis* or the female companion of Radha and Krishna and ever longed for the opportunity for witnessing from a distance the eternal love-making of Radha and Krishna in a supernatural land of Vrindavana. The Gitagovinda sings the separation and union of Radha and Krishna and it "marks the culmination of the classical Sanskrit poetic tradition and the beginning of the real flowering of the Indian vernacular poetic and the medieval Vaisnava devotional traditions" (Siegel, 1978: 27). While analysing the different dimensions of Gitagovinda, Siegel

pointed out that it is neither a religious allegory nor a purely secular erotic poem. Jaydeva has juxtaposed conventional descriptions of carnal love-play with traditional expressions of devotion. In order to serve this particular purpose an ambiguous relationship between the sacred and profane dimensions of love have been established.

9. The local name of the Santal rebellion which broke out in 1855. Strictly speaking 'hul' was not a rebellion but it was a form of severe protest against the British regime for the protection of the tribal interest. Being faced by time-long injustice and oppression caused by the local inhabitants or the *dikhus* (non-Santal) the Santals became furious and they eventually stood against those misbehaviours unitedly. It was not a mere spasmodic outburst. The causes of the insurrection were deeply rooted to the changing situations of the country. It had its origin in the economic grievances of the tribal people living in the hills and jungles.
10. The literal meaning of this is skirts of the hills. The newly-formed site at the foot of the Rajmahal Hills which stretches from Sahibganj on the Ganga to Nangalbanga on the Rampurhat Road. The Damin-i-Koh was formed in 1832-33 within a definite boundary. It was demarcated by John Petty Wood. The region was distributed among the districts of Bhagalpur, Murshidabad and Birbhum. It comprised 1366.01 square miles of plain and hilly tracts of land.
11. These are comparatively long, impersonal narrative songs which depict a single incident or incidents. Various incidents are found to reflect through the content, style and designation of the folk. A narrative folk ballad is not only a poem which tells a story or an event, it is also a poem that has been transmitted primarily by word of mouth. It is easily understood by almost every person in a folk group and learnt through generations.
12. It is a supernatural power and is regarded by many tribal people as the cause of all energy. The bonga is said to be an impersonal force which is at the substratum of all activities whether of the living or of the non-living. Differences between individuals, differences of power and prestige are thought to be due to the degree of Bonga power. But the bonga is vaguely understood by most of the tribal groups as powers indefinite and impersonal.
13. It is a process by which a low Hindu caste or tribal group alters its way of life by bringing a considerable change in the customs, ritual and ideology in the direction of a high caste-group. Indian society is largely characterized by the waves of sanskritization. Srinivas pointed out this trend in Indian society appreciably specially in his study on the Coorgs of South India. Marriott's study on Indian sanskritization is worth-mentioning when he proceeds to analyse the nature and extent of village deities at Kishan Garhi in the background of sanskritic celebrations.
14. During British period a number of small-scale and large-scale uprisings took place throughout the length and breadth of the country.

The Bagdis of south-western part of Bengal organised such an uprising known as Sadar and Paik revolt for lodging a protest against various maltreatment in their day-to-day life. The united move of this down-trodden community for achieving a particular end was the characteristic feature though most of the small-scale protests were nipped in the bud by the British rulers of those days.

15. The deities which lie outside the greater fold of Vedic pantheon. These deities have their own indigenous origin and have developed in the background of the actual way of life of the organisers.
16. The musical presentation of snake-story which is generally performed on *Sravana Sanskranti* or the last day of the Bengali month Sravana (July-August) by all sections of the lower classes of people. This song is sung with the accompaniment of special kind of musical instrument known as Bisamdhaki—made of goat's intestine. The grave sound of this instrument produces a harmonious symphony with the songs of the snake deity. These collectively arouse a sense of tender sentiment amongst the listeners.
17. The influence of Aryan cultural traditions in the non-Aryan mode of life. The region where the present study has been conducted was the abode of diverse aboriginal people with indigenous traditions and world views. The theory of non-Aryan characters in the life and activities of Bengal is supported by the Vedic literature. It is significant that there is no reference to Bengal in the Samhita of the Rig Veda. It is probable that Bengal was outside the zone of Aryan culture even in the later Vedic period. The Baudhayana Dharma Sutra prescribes a penance for the devotees who visit Pundra and Vanga representing North and East Bengal. In due course the gradual infiltration of the Aryans and their culture in Bengal brought a revolutionary change in the way of life. But a considerable section of people living in hills and forests managed to remain outside the pale of Aryanization.
18. It is a process by which the Brahminical thoughts and ideas are slowly incorporated into the indigenous customs and ritualistic performances. The dominant position of the Brahmins in the then society attracted a large number of persons belonging to the lower strata to imitate the Brahminical way of life as far as practicable and thereby raise their status in the society. The Brahmins, on the other hand, took it as a great opportunity to cast their thoughts and ideas over the broad-based indigenous social system. In this part of Bengal rapid Brahminization was effected in the Pala-Sena period. But the actual process of Brahminization had begun as early as the period of the Guptas. During these processes a deliberate effort was made to synthesize and harmonize various sundry 'gods' and 'goddesses' with certain divinities who had by then gained pre-eminence over the more classical deities.
19. Tantric Buddhism is composed of different elements. In the earliest phase of Tantric Buddhism great emphasis was laid on the various

elements like *mantra*, *mudra*, *mandala*, etc., but it gradually introduced the sexo-yogic practice and this composite system became known by the term Vajrayana. Vajrayana is the 'vehicle' which leads men to salvation not only by using *mantras* but by means of all things which are donated by the word 'Vajra'—(Winternitz, 1972: 388). Sometimes it is taken as the queer mixture of monistic philosophy, magic and erotics with the small admixtures of Buddhist thinking pattern.

20. The followers of Siva cult are known as Saiva. Saivism is to be traced back to the Vedic god Rudra. He personifies the dreadful and destructive phenomena of storms and thunderbolt which destroy men and animals within a moment. The characteristics of Siva or Mahadeva are of profound interest. He is powerful, wrathful and impetuous god, but generous and bountiful, and spares nothing when he is propitiated. The object of worship in Saivism is the Linga or phallus.
21. These are regarded as sacred spaces in Tantra philosophy where parts of the body of the goddess were discovered and venerated. The legend attached to it goes to narrate that Devi Sati had to die out of tremendous insult before the *mahayajna* arranged by her father, King Daksa. Siva was gone mad by his inconsolable loss of Sati, destroys the *mahayajna* of Daksa and began to dance wildly with the dead body of Sati on his shoulder. The fire of anger of the "Deva of Devas" became so intense that the *pralaya* seemed to threaten the three worlds. Then Vishnu, in order to save the creation of the universe, followed the wandering Siva and dismembered Sati's body with his *chakra*. The *pithas* par excellence of the goddess derived from the dismemberment of Devi Sati following his disconsoling demise. The different parts of the body fell "from the realm of the God and in their scattering became loci of hope for millions" (Beane, 1977: 202) which became the worship centres. There are 51 such *pithas* or centres of worship throughout India which are broadly discussed in the *Pithamala*.
22. The annual sun-festival with primitive character which is held on the vernal equinox or on the day when the sun is supposed to pass to the next sign at the equinox is known by the term 'Gajan' (Bhattacharya, 1977: 57). It is a purely indigenous ritual and it is not affiliated to any orthodox Hindu Purana. But it is extensively practised over the different tracts of rural Bengal. The *gajan* is accompanied by a complex system of various rituals and most of the time it is associated with a large fair. In the region under study the *gajan* ceremony is inextricably interwoven with the worship of Dharmaraj which becomes the centres of attraction of the villagers for months together.
23. The celebrated banyan tree (*Ficus bengalensis*) grown at the vicinity of the temple of Bakranath is regarded as an eternal tree with a close root connection underneath with the similar trees at Prayag, Kashi, Srikshetra and Gaya. It is specially venerated by the pilgrims during different occasions.

24. The celebrated night when the marriage ceremony between Lord Siva and Parvati is held with due regard and profound merriment. It is regarded as the most auspicious moment and there is a universal belief that any kind of *pūja* offering to Siva on this day brings prosperity and long life to the worshipper. The womenfolk remain in fasting for the whole day and in the night they offer *pūja* to Siva for getting his blessings in family life.
25. The celebrated site for the *pir*. Amongst different sections of the Muslim community there is a cult of *pir*. The *pirs* are regarded as saints or holy persons. Their special contributions in the sphere of religion and other pious deeds have raised them in the higher level with divine recognition. The tombs of *pirs* are worshipped by the people belonging not only to the Muslim community but many persons from Hindu community also come to pay homage to the *pirasthan*—the shrine of the *pir*.
26. The shrine of Data Sahib—the famous Muslim saint in the district of Birbhum, who lived within the region of study. At Patharchapuri village there is a shrine which is covered by a piece of cloth known as the *majar* of Data Sahib. He was famous for the establishment of Hindu-Muslim unity in the field of religious sentiments. Data Sahib was believed to have possessed many super human characters which made him conspicuous throughout the length and breadth of the country.
27. *Maner manush* or Man of the Heart is the divine spirit which resides in each human body who is regarded as the eternal beloved in relation to the human personality. The theory of *maner manush* highlights the Baul's earnest desire to live in constant communion with his inner self. To reach the actual stage of getting such communion one is to pass through various spiritual ordeals.
28. The Bauls are wandering about in search of truth. The secret truth can be realised by intuition. It is believed that when the body is purified and the love for the beloved one is so deep and broad-based that the feelings of all worldly matters find no place and the body arrives at the condition of near death. This condition of the body of the Baul is known *jyante mara*, the literal meaning of which is death while the body is in a living state.

Village Deities and Indigenous Beliefs

INDIA is principally the land of villages. These are largely self-sufficient units. The socio-economic life and activities of these villages are considerably influenced by ritualistic performances. It is to be seen that every step of life of the village folk is conditioned by numerous religious-oriented practices, and all the inhabitants of the village try their level best to observe these as far as they can. The popular saying that "thirteen kinds of rituals in twelve months" is certainly the outcome of such observance of ritualistic performances throughout the year. Indian villages are specially characterized by the presence of numerous castes and classes belonging to the various religious sects. They follow different life-ways and thought-ways of their own and due to this various phases of philosophical outlook and thinking pattern have evolved which are attuned to the general consensus of the life of the society as a whole. Indian village life is conspicuously influenced by the large number of deities of diversified nature who are found at the different places. The deities possess some specialised features by which they can be identified as the part and parcel of the village life through the ages. Most of the time these deities have got no Vedic background and at the same time the presence of non-Aryan rites and customs in their daily and annual worship have proved their antiquity in the cultural history of the country. These village deities are specially to be found in association with the lower caste people and the participation of these people in the worship and festival of the deities

is very much greater in comparison to those of the higher caste people. The village deities may or may not possess any particular form. Most of the time a piece or pieces of stones represent the deities and the rural folk unhesitatingly recognize these with due importance and dignity. These village deities are rarely found inside the temple; they are characteristically seen under the open sky and at the foot of the trees, on the embankments of the tank or even in the paddy fields. The village deities are specially meant for the general welfare of the village. At the time of problematic situations in relation to the life of the inhabitants, the villagers unhesitatingly approach the deities for immediate solution. These deities are regarded as the guardians of the villagers—their saviours and protectors. These deities come very close to all classes of people, and sometimes people, irrespective of castes and religion, flock towards these deities in order to ward off dangers. The approach to these deities is made directly and in almost all the cases everybody has easy access to them. Therefore, these village deities are the guardians of the rural folk in the real sense of the term.

These indigenous village deities differ strikingly from the *Puranic* gods and goddesses in the many ways. The latter kinds of gods and goddesses have their *Puranic* tradition and they are specially established in the well-organised temples—which may be brick-built or mud-built. These gods and goddesses are always served by the Brahmin priests and their worship is conducted in an orthodox way. The higher caste groups come in close association with the worship of these gods and goddesses in large numbers in comparison to those of the lower caste people. The latter groups of people do not find any opportunity to actively participate in the worship or in the festivals in connection with the *Puranic* gods and goddesses. But in case of the folk deities no such discrimination is to be found and the people in all levels of socio-ritual status may be allowed to participate in the actual worship. The folk deities have been called as the greatest unifying factor of village life and, therefore, the pattern of life of inhabitants of the villages are seen to be reflected centering round these deities. In order to highlight this reflection of behaviour-pattern and mode of reaction of the people some principal types of village deities have been selected. These are Chandi, Manasa, Dharmaraj, Mahadana and Kali. The

region under study possesses a large number of indigenous village deities of different names. But for serving the purpose of the present study five principal village deities have been taken into consideration because of the fact that they involve a large number of people during their worship and connected festivals. As a natural consequence a concerted group-life is highlighted through the observance of the worship of these deities. In this connection, the goddess Kali, though now a sanskritic deity, would come into the picture as her mode of worship brings forth some non-sanskritized patterns and it establishes a close link with an indigenous village deity through the pattern of propitiation. In the succeeding lines the genesis of these village deities thus mentioned have been discussed one after another for getting a comprehensive idea over them in the perspective of the life of the rural folk as a whole.

Dharmaraj

Dharmaraj is a problematic and at the same time very interesting folk deity whose influence is greatly felt on an extensive area spread over the south-western part of West Bengal. The genesis of Dharmaraj has been shrouded in a mystery. This deity has been and is being studied by the different scholars. But most of the time it has been seen that the scholars differ from each other as regards the very nature of the deity. Some say it is a Buddhist deity, others relate it with Siva, a few are of opinion that Dharmaraj is the form of Surya, Baruna and Yama¹ of the Hindu pantheon. There are some scholars who refute all these opinions and say that Dharmaraj is nothing but a genuine folk deity which has invited diverse opinions from time to time.

Dharmaraj has got no definite form; he is represented by a piece of stone. The shape of this piece may be round, oblong, conical or even irregular. Sometimes broken pieces of images are worshipped as Dharmaraj. In some cases wood fossils are also represented as Dharmaraj. Generally, Dharmaraj finds his seat at the foot of a tree or in the midst of an open field. But in special cases mud-built or brick-built shrines are erected according to the means of his devotees. The worship of Dharmaraj is, most of the time, conducted by the lower caste priest-cum-supervisor or the Deyashi. In the earlier periods the Dom caste

used to officiate at religious rites connected with Dharmaraj. During the annual festival of Dharmaraj people belonging to the lower caste take active interest.

It was Mahamahopadhyay Haraprasad Shastri, who, first of all, attracted the attention of the scholars towards the nature and extent of Dharma worship in Bengal. He tried to analyse the various performances relating to the worship of the deity concerned and held that Dharmaraj was nothing but a Buddhist deity (1894: 55-61). In his one dozen scholarly articles, subsequently published, Mahamahopadhyay Shastri ably focused light on the Buddhist elements in the festival of Dharmaraj. But from the very beginning the view of Mahamahopadhyay roused controversies and ultimately it gave rise to interest among the different scholars to examine the views as put forward by Mahamahopadhyay from close quarters. Dasgupta has remarked that there is no proper reason "to style it purely Buddhistic or Hindu or indigenous either or in origin or in nature—it is as much a hotchpotch in origin . . ." (1969: 308). Bagchi's observations in that regard advocated for Buddhistic origin of Dharmaraj. He considered it as a survival of Buddhism in Bengal (1943: 425). The renowned linguist Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee is of opinion that the word 'Dharma' is sanskritized form of a missing Austro-Asiatic word which means tortoise. From this he opines that the Dharma cult is directly related to the cult of the tortoise. According to him, "Dharma, who is, however, described as the supreme deity, creator and ordainer of the universe, superior even to Brahma, Vishnu and Siva and at times identified with them, has nothing of the abstraction of the Buddhist Dharma about him" (1970: 236). He has also pointed out that the different types of dances that are performed in the premise of the deity have got very ancient origin. These are neither related to Buddhistic nor Brahminical views. He considers these to be Austric in origin. Rai Bahadur Sarat Chandra Roy's observation opens up a new horizon. He gave his opinion that Dharmaraj was nothing but Sun God as in ancient Hindu literature the name of Dharma indicated the Sun. Professor K.P. Chattopadhyay advocated the view that Dharmaraj was the later development of Varuna—the Vedic god who used to be worshipped with the human sacrifice. According to him, the present-day custom of the sacrifice of the *Loue* goat² to

the deity is said to be the substitute of human sacrifice. He also put forward the confusion of the present-day priests as regards the identification of Dharmaraj with Vishnu, Yama, Siva and Surya. It resulted in the invocation of the deity as *bahurupa* or multiform. Dr. Nihar Ranjan Roy observes that the Dharma Thakur is basically a primitive tribal god and his present form is resulted due to intermixtures of countless heterogeneous elements (1356 B.S. : 586). In the recent period Dr. Asutosh Bhattacharya has studied this deity through direct field investigation and by way of analysing the inner significance of the various performances observed at the time of worship he has come to the conclusion that Dharmaraj is purely a pre-Aryan deity. He has got no connection with the Buddhism or Hinduism. At the same time he has remarked that Dharmaraj "is neither the Vedic nor pseudo-Puranic Sun-god of higher Hindu pantheon, but the tradition of Dharma is based on a primitive Sun-cult and through due subsequent influence of Buddhism and Hinduism it has incorporated into itself certain elements of both of them" (1951: 360).

From various performances that are observed before the deity during worship it is evident that a large section of these is based on magical beliefs found amongst the different primitive communities of the world. The hook-swinging³ activities of the *cadak* performances are nothing but the imitation of the swinging of the Sun at the summer solstice which indicates a magical belief in moving the Sun in a regular fashion as the Sun is believed to be positive force of life on earth. The ceremonial bath of Dharmaraj with water or milk and also the immersion of the deity for a continuous period in the water of a tank has a direct connection with the magical belief for getting rain. In some places burning fire is ceremonially placed on the head of the deity and in other places the deity is held in hand and a ceremonial circumambulation is performed before a glittering fire. All these factors have got a hidden connection with the rain-charm found amongst the primitive communities of the world. There are a large number of performances where bodily tortures are made by piercing the flesh or tongue with the help of sharp rods or hooks. These cause bloodshed of the particular person who approaches the deity as a devotee. There is a primitive belief that the human blood has got a potential power of

fertilizing the earth. The blood drops are supposed to augment the fertility of the soil. The extensive use of country-made liquor or *hanria* at the special performance, *bhanral khela*,⁴ during the worship of Dharmaraj supports the view of primitive association with the deity. The *bhanral khela* is an essential part of the festival and it is not found in any form in Hindu or similar other religious spheres. It is believed by the primitive communities that the liquor has got the effect of increasing fertility in man. For this reason liquor has been taking the most important place in the socio-religious life of the primitive communities. Liquor, according to primitive philosophy, enhances the fertility. The Santal cosmogony supports this view. Marang Buru—the supreme deity of the Santals—taught the Santals to prepare liquor and after drinking that liquid life-force they obtained the required enthusiasm for progeniture (Chattopadhyay, 1935: 423). In the multifarious performances held in the name of Dharmaraj a trend of supremacy is seen as regards the indigenous beliefs and practices. The sacrifices of the animals consisting of duck, fowls, pigs, etc., also indicate the folk characteristics of the deity. The worship of the deity through the different attempts of bodily tortures also supports the view of pre-Aryan cultural stage. The Deyashi of Dharmaraj in almost all the cases belong to the lower caste, and even untouchable section of the people. The local caste-based occupational groups have found distinctive place in the worship of the deity. Sometimes they have acquired the essential position in the different stages of the festival. These features pin-point the indigenous nature as well as pre-Aryan features of the festival centering round the deity. It is also supported by the fact that at the places where Brahminical influences have penetrated less, there is no particular hymn for worship.

It is probable that Dharmaraj evolved long long ago when the country was exclusively inhabited by the non-Aryan groups of people and the deity was connected with the magical activities and other supernatural beliefs of the people concerned. Dharmaraj was established and propitiated according to their own line of thinking which, in course of time, received different thoughts and ideas from the other religious spheres developed in the later periods. This part of the country has become the melting pot of various religious thoughts and ideas, and due to

constant interaction an intermingling of diverse religious activities has resulted. Dharmaraj, the deity of our sphere of discussion, had to pass through this long way and during the extensive period variegated ideas from the different religious thought had been put on Dharmaraj which resulted in fashioning the deity in a very complicated way. The diversified rites and rituals centering round the deity have caused controversies amongst the scholars in his proper identification. As a consequence the deity in question may possess the Buddhist influence and/or Hindu form of ideas. It may also have got the characteristic features that are sustained by the other contemporary religious groups. But one or two features of different religions present in this folk deity would not be sufficient to draw a connecting link between these two phases. Therefore, Mahamahopadhyay's view on Dharmaraj as a Buddhist deity, Chatterjee's idea on the connection of the deity with the tortoise cult, Chattopadhyay's inclination of connecting Dharmaraj with the Vedic god Varuna, Roy's trend of connecting the deity with the Sun-god found in ancient Hindu literature are yet to be investigated properly in the light of further research in the line. Bhattacharaya's opinion regarding the identification of Dharmaraj as the folk deity of Bengal with numerous non-Aryan features is plausible to a considerable extent. Dharmaraj, according to him, is intimately connected with the fertility cult relating to both earth and men. His association with the various magical performances also advocates the view of the primitiveness of the deity in question. Dr. Nihar Ranjan Roy also has observed Dharmaraj's direct connection with the folk religion of Bengal. In course of time, he opines, Dharmaraj has become the part and parcel of the Puranic beliefs and practices.

The Doms were the traditional worshippers of Dharmaraj and according to the different ancient literatures, Dharmaraj was their guardian deity. In course of time the deity's supernatural activities as illustrated and spread by his traditional worshippers attracted the attention of the general public consisting of diversified castes and communities. When the country was influenced by the Buddhism and Hinduism, to a considerable extent, the influencing deity did not, as a natural consequence, vanish from the peoples' mind and the newly set up religious pantheon; rather the deity was covered with a coating of new religious

thinking though the indigenous nature was quite intact inside the covering of the later period. In order to have an actual idea on the workings of the various religious thoughts and ideas on this particular folk deity it is essential to analyse all the hidden and submerged elements in the perspective of the particular period.

There are numerous evidences of the transference of the non-Aryan deity like Dharmaraj in the greater fold of Hinduism. The process of Hinduization of the deity is to be found at the various levels of development in the different villages. There are some villages where Dharmaraj is being worshipped by the Brahmin priest though the non-Brahmin *deyashi* still exerts some influence. In these villages the Brahminical ideas have largely been incorporated and the worship is performed after the instructions of the Vedic religious texts. But in some villages, Dharmaraj is still being worshipped by the non-Brahmin priest following the indigenous way. At the same time it will be seen that the work of supervision of this important village deity is gradually being transferred from the hands of lower caste groups to the higher section of the villagers. It will be evident from the different facts that with this transference in the sphere of Brahmin dominated group special stresses have been given to wipe out the folk elements like bodily tortures, use of country-made liquor, etc., from the domain of the deity's worship. Where these cannot be totally or partially thrown out of the way of propitiation, the higher caste people carefully avoid these rude performances and these are left over to the low caste groups. Such interaction of the ideas is to be felt continuously in the nature of worship of Dharmaraj. The slow process of sanskritization of the non-sanskritic performances is still to be seen in the sphere of propitiation of this folk deity. Dharmaraj, worshipped at the different villages, provides fruitful materials in framing a general idea on the sanskritization of a non-Aryan deity. From time immemorial Dharmaraj has been and is being discussed by the various scholars on different points but no attempt has yet been made to focus considerable light in this particular line. With this end in view some attempts have been made to find out the nature of interaction between Great Tradition of the Hinduism and the little tradition of the folk religion at the various places of this treatise. The trend of

sanskritization of the village deity like Dharmaraj himself has also been brought to light at the different spheres of discussion in this discourse.

When Dharmaraj got an access to the fold of Hinduism he began to be identified as an eminent Hindu deity, a folk literature flourished which depicted the power and influence of Dharmaraj on the people as a whole. Starting from the fifteenth century A.D. a trend was felt in the propagation of the glory of Dharmaraj through the folk narratives popularly known as *Mangal Kavyas*⁵ and it continued in full swing till the eighteenth century. The *Dharma Mangal Kavya*⁶ has been composed by a large number of folk poets who not only tried to depict the immense importance of the glorified deity but they had also incorporated the discussion of history, mythology, beliefs, customs and superstitions of the then Bengal in order to create the perspective of Dharmaraja's divine influence and power. These folk songs are sung by the professional musicians with the accompaniment of musical instruments and thereby they attract large audience, who listen with great attention the divine activities of Dharmaraj and his kindness over the people who give him due regard. It would not be out of place to discuss, in brief, the central theme of the folk story which constitutes the *Dharma Mangal Kavyas*.

Dharmapala II was then ruling at Gauda with the assistance of his Prime Minister Mahamada. One day the emperor became surprised to see Soma Ghose, one of his faithful and loyal subjects, in the imprisonment. This was on account of the trick of Mahamada. The emperor at once released Soma Ghose and appointed him caretaker of Karna Sen—the feudatory king of Trisasthi fort⁷ on the bank of the river Ajay. In course of time, Ichhai, the son of Soma Ghose, rebelled and after driving away Karna Sen became the master of the fort. Gradually he took steps to spread his influence over the region known as Dhekur. The servants of the emperor were very much insulted when they came to collect the rent. The fact enraged the emperor and he attacked Dhekur with a large number of soldiers and a terrible fight was started. But in spite of it the emperor was defeated. Karna Sen's six sons were killed and he became disheartened. When Karna came to the emperor with his heavy heart, the latter wanted to arrange marriage of his sister-in-law, Ranjavati

with Karna Sen. Mahamada, who was also the brother of Ranjavati, vehemently opposed this. But the marriage was performed through the direct supervision of the emperor, who sent the married couple to Maynanagar after appointing Karna Sen as the feudatory king. Being requested by Ranjavati repeatedly Karna Sen came to the emperor of Gauda for collecting the information about Ranjavati's parents. At that time Karna Sen was very much insulted by Mahamada and he was rebuked for Ranjavati's barrenness. On his return Ranjavati heard everything and she made up her mind to pray before Dharmaraj for having a child. Ranjavati took the instruction of Ramai Pandit and she adored Dharmaraj for a long time with deep devotion and sincerity. Dharmaraj became satisfied with Ranjavati's devotion and ultimately through the grace of Dharmaraj she was blessed with a male child. The child was named as Lausen. When Mahamada heard about the birth of a son, he planned to kidnap him but due to Dharmaraj's mercy his mission failed. From the very boyhood Lausen became exceedingly brave and spirited. When he attained maturity, he made up his mind to visit Gauda. But his mother Ranjavati did not give her permission for fear of any mishap. At last she was convinced by the courageous attitude of her son and allowed him to start for Gauda. From the very beginning Mahamada was looking for opportunities to put Lausen into trouble. Mahamada gave his directive to send Lausen to Kamrupa for collecting rent from that area. While going to that critical place Lausen fell into trouble which he could easily overcome owing to the blessing of Dharmaraj. On reaching the very difficult region in the whole empire Lausen did not face any trouble because of the fact that the god Dharmaraj was always by his side. After doing his job well Lausen returned to emperor of Gauda with full honour.

Mahamada attempted several times to put Lausen in trouble but he could not succeed. Then he took last resort. Mahamada tricked the emperor in appointing Lausen as a collector of rent in the region known as Dhekur. Lausen immediately got ready to start for the place with joy. But the news of his new appointment brought profound grief and anxiety in the mind of Ranjavati and Karna Sen as it was the particular place where Karna Sen was defeated and lost his six sons. Lausen was not afraid

of anything and he started for Dhekur on the bank of the river Ajay with nine hundred thousand soldiers.

At that period Ichhai Ghose was ruling there as an independent prince. Ichhai was courageous and freedom-loving man. He was a devotee of the goddess Durga and by means of his painstaking meditation he had obtained a great missile from the goddess. When the news of the arrival of Lausen, a direct representative of the emperor of Gauda, at Dhekur, reached Ichhai Ghose, he became furious. As soon as Lausen reached the bank of Ajay, a fierce battle began between Ichhai Ghose and Lausen. The fight was practically held between the two divine powers—one belonging to Dharmaraj and the other to the goddess Durga. The story of the terrible fight still pulsate in the folklore of the locality—in the midst of the open fields, villages and tanks; the memory of the remote past periods is still throbbing in the spontaneous flow of folk life of this particular land situated at the northern corner of our region of study.

On the southern bank of the river Ajay, Ichhai Ghose exerted his tremendous influence. He was a *Goala* (milkman) by caste. According to the different folk narratives collected from this particular region the following picture on the life of Ichhai Ghose and his terrible fight with Lausen has been drawn.

Ichhai had lost his parents during boyhood. He used to roam about on the bank of the river Ajay and cried loudly for his mother. On hearing the ardent call day after day the goddess Bhawani once appeared before him. She told Ichhai that she herself was his mother and thereby advised him to remember her at the time of dire necessity. In course of time Ichhai became a devotee of the Goddess Bhawani and began to be blessed with her grace during different phases of his life. In course of time Ichhai was regarded as a brave and courageous man of the whole region known as *Gopabhum*,⁸ as the locality was mainly inhabited by the *Gopa* or *Goalas* (milkmen), and ultimately his leadership was accepted by all concerned.

But, according to the instruction of the emperor of Gauda, Lausen approached the northern bank of the Ajay along with his brother to snatch away the authority of Dhekur from the hands of Ichhai Ghose. On the way from Gauda, Lausen got the direct help from seven Kalubirs who belonged to Dom caste

and were very strong and courageous in nature. Those two brothers in association with the seven Kalubirs planned to attack Dhekur after crossing the river. But when they reached the bank, they became surprised to see that the river was full with flood water. On seeing this they started calling Dharmaraj and at last they sat on the bank of the river in deep meditation to rescue them from the impending danger. Dharmaraj became satisfied with their ardent call and instructed them to ride on two horses and cross the river by a single leap in the air. Ichhai had got a boon from the goddess Bhawani that any enemy of his who would try to cross the river by boat would be instantaneously drowned. But due to grace of Dharmaraj, Lausen and his brother took the aerial path and thus they reached the territory of Ichhai Ghose. People of the locality still remember those terrible days by connecting different events with the different places of the locality. On the northern bank of the river there is a solitary place known as *Lausentala*⁹ where Lausen sat in deep meditation seeking the grace of Dharmaraj. Just by the side of this four hoof-marks are detected by the people which are said to be marked by the horses of Lausen and his brother.

Terrible fight started between the two groups. But none of the parties came out victorious because both of them were enjoyed divine grace. When Ichhai Ghose approached the goddess, she gave her assurance that nobody would be able to kill him in her presence. Lausen took all possible steps to kill and defeat Ichhai but every time the latter was saved by the grace of goddess. At last Lausen and his brother began to propitiate Dharmaraj day and night for getting a way out. When the two brothers were in deep meditation before Dharmaraj, goddess Bhawani herself appeared before them in the guise of a dancing girl and wanted to deviate them from the intended goal. But the two brothers could recognise the trick and they directly requested the goddess not to distract them from the path of meditation. They appealed to the goddess to treat them as her sons. At this the goddess became satisfied with the two brothers and told them that they would also be successful in their mission. The two brothers, after a few days, got instruction through an oracle to invite five Brahmins from the west and arrange for a *homa* (sacrificial fire) and then to kill Ichhai Ghose and offer

his head to the blazing fire. If it was done as instructed, the divine power would be able to help him.

In the meantime goddess Bhawani was invited by the deities of the Heaven and she was accompanied by *Narad*.¹⁰ At the time of departure the goddess had warned Ichhai not to start for the battlefield on that day as it was an inauspicious Saturday, otherwise he would lose his life. But Ichhai could not sit idle when the troop of Lausen appeared in the field. When the army of Lausen began to proceed towards his fort, he came out with his full force and started fighting with great force. A large number of persons were killed, heavy amount of blood began to roll down on the earth forming a canal. After conducting a fierce fight Ichhai was killed and his head was chopped off by Lausen, and then it was offered to the sacred fire of *homa*. It ended everything. On her return from the Heaven goddess Bhawani was stricken with sorrow for the fate of Ichhai. She began to cry aloud in search of Ichhai.

Ichhai's defeat on the inauspicious Saturday is still recounted by the people of the locality. There are many folk songs on this issue which illustrate the following idea:

“Sanibārer bārbelā
Rane Jeonā Ichhāi Goalā.”

(Free translation: On the inauspicious Saturday, O, Ichhai Goala, do not go to the battle field.)

But the clarion call of the battle-field could not keep Ichhai inside the four walls of the fort. His expression in reply to the deity's warning is still recited by the rural people—

“Mā jar sahāy
Tar ābār raney bhay?”

(Whose patron is the mother goddess herself, is he afraid of war?)

The people of the locality believe firmly that the mother goddess is still wandering about in search of her favourite Ichhai. In the deep hours of night the sound of her cry can sometimes be heard. There is a long fen on the bank of the

Ajay river which is known by the name "Kanduney bill" or the fen of cry. It was the place where goddess Bhawani searched Ichhai crying loudly in deep sorrow.

Thus, Lausen won the battle by the grace of Dharmaraj. In due course he made a strong attempt to popularise the worship of Dharmaraj throughout the length and breadth of the country.

Chandi

Chandi is a complicated type of deity. Though this particular goddess is now seen to be extensively worshipped throughout the country, yet the name of Chandi is not to be found in the Vedic literatures. She is absent in the Vedic lore. On this basis scholars are of opinion that the goddess Chandi may be traced back to the pre-Vedic period and she is regarded as a non-Aryan deity. Her active role in the socio-ritual activities of the tribal groups indicates Chandi's close association with the pre-Aryan cultural phase in this country. S.C. Roy's observations on the goddess Chandi among the Oraons of Chhotanagpur is important in this connection. The Oraons propitiate the female deity Chandi. She is identified by them as the goddess of hunting and war. Chandi is represented by a roundish stone. An Oraon village may possess more than one *asthan* (seat) of Chandi where the Chandi slab is found to be surrounded by some smaller stones, and these are described by them as the offsprings of Chandi. Chandi is the goddess of the bachelors and the propitiation of the deity is organised by the bachelors only. The annual festival of the deity in question is held on the full moon day in the month of *Magh* (January-February). During the festival the Oraon young men and women collectively enjoy a grand feast and observe the day in dancing and merry-making in the village *ukra* or dancing ground. The hunting and food-gathering tribe—the Birhors—of Chhotanagpur region also propitiate a kind of deity known as *Chandibonga*. The *Chandibonga* has got no idol; she is believed to reside at the foot of a particular tree inside the village. The Birhors collectively approach the deity with the different hunting implements before starting for any communal or individual hunt. Sometimes sacrifices of hens are made on the eve of hunting expedition.

In ancient literature Chandi has been regarded as the deity

of hunting. It is not unnatural that the deity of hunting—popularly known as Chandi—has infiltrated into the greater fold of Hinduism from the non-Aryan sources. A close connecting link is to be felt in between the tribal and Hindu traditions. Some are of opinion that the word 'Chandi' itself has originated from the non-Aryan languages. The original word 'Chandi' has gradually entered into the sphere of Sanskrit language and became identified by the different nomenclatures like Chandi, Chandika, Chandeswari, etc..

From time immemorial Chandi has been propitiated as the goddess of hunting. According to the ancient literature Kalaketu, the celebrated hunter, was the first worshipper of Chandi. She was worshipped in a very crude way and the offerings of pigs and other like animals were regularly made to her. In the region under study Chandi resides in the houses of lower caste people who are regarded by higher caste communities as untouchables. But the goddess in question exerts considerable influence in the day-to-day life of the higher caste people as well. The lower caste priests or *Deyashis* of Chandi possess a command over the higher caste religious philosophy, when the worship of Chandi takes place for the general welfare of the village community concerned. In ancient literature Chandi has been recognised as 'Hadir Jhi' or the daughter of Hadi—the untouchable caste (Sen, 1920: 90-91). This traditional association of Chandi with the untouchable caste indicates the non-Aryan origin of the particular deity. In course of time the non-Aryan deity has found place in the literature of the then Bengal and ultimately the worship of the deity concerned has gradually spread throughout the length and breadth of the country. Chandi in the non-Aryan tradition has got no idol of her own. She is represented by a piece or pieces of stone. In the different shrines owned and organised by the lower caste people the deities are identified by vermilion smeared stone-slabs. But after the infiltration of the deity in the later Hindu tradition different anthropomorphic forms have been given to her through the composition of various rhymes of meditation in the praise of Chandi herself. The goddess Chandi provides a fruitful field for the study and analysis of the development of various anthropomorphic forms starting from the ordinary stone-slabs. The trend of sanskritization of the deity in question is to be well-

understood through the long spell intermixture of great and little tradition.

*Chandi Mangal Kavyas*¹¹ clearly depict the process through which the non-Aryan deity has gradually developed roots in the age-old tradition of the Hindu philosophy. In *Chandi Mangal Kavya* there are two different stories,—one is centered round the celebrated hunter Kalaketu and his hunting expedition, but the other one is focused through the life and activities of a merchant named Dhanapati. In the latter story goddess Chandi is not associated with the beasts or hunters and their hunting devices. In this story Chandi has been recognised as *Mangal Chandi*. Scholars have put forward various opinions as regards the emergence of the deity in question. Some say that the deity is meant for the overall well-being of the people. For this reason the deity has been so named. There are other scholars who opine that the goddess Chandi had been worshipped by the Mars and, therefore, the deity has received the nomenclature as the *Mangal Chandi*. In ancient time a king named Mangal arranged for worship of goddess Chandi and ultimately the deity was publicly identified as *Mangal Chandi*. It is also believed that as the deity is being worshipped by the well-wisher of human groups on the auspicious Tuesdays, so the deity has received an adjective *Mangal* before her name. The two stories found in *Chandi Mangal Kavyas* discuss the two different view-points which should be summarized below to grasp the total picture of the deity's influence on folk life.

I.

Goddess Chandi wanted to be propitiated by the people of the earth and for this reason she decided to appoint Nilambar—the son of Indra. Chandi went to Siva and asked him to send Nilambar to the earth, so that he would arrange for her worship. But Siva did not agree to that proposal and he did not like to curse Nilambar for no fault of his. Chandi took shelter inside a flower in the guise of a worm. When Nilambar plucked that flower in association with other flowers and worshipped Siva, the worm bit him. It enraged Siva, who immediately imprecated Nilambar to take birth on earth as a hunter. In the long run Nilambar was born in the house of a hunter named Dharmaketu

and he became identified as Kalaketu. His wife, named Chhaya, followed him and she eventually took her birth on earth as a daughter of a hunter and became known as Fullora.

From the very boyhood days Kalaketu was very healthy and strong. He used to play with the deadly animals of the forest. He became a very expert hunter. When he was eleven years old, Kalaketu married Fullora. Both of them started new life and they used to live on hunted animals. Kalaketu went to the forest and hunted a large number of animals every day. The animals of the forest became very annoyed by the oppression of Kalaketu and they jointly approached Chandi to save them from tyranny. One day Chandi kept all the animals out of the sight of Kalaketu with the result that the hunter could not get any animal. They had to starve on that day. The next day when Kalaketu started hunting into the deep forest he came across many auspicious signs. But all on a sudden he saw a golden iguana which was a very inauspicious animal on the eve of commencement of journey. Kalaketu became very angry and immediately pierced the golden iguana by his arrow. He decided to eat the burnt flesh of iguana if he failed to hunt any animal. Kalaketu could not hunt any animal as he did not find them due to Chandi's trick. He came home with the golden iguana and asked his wife to skin and cook it. Fullora then went to her neighbour's house for asking some quantity of rice. In the meantime, Kalaketu started to sell the stale meat in the market.

After returning from the neighbour's house Fullora was utterly surprised to see a pretty young lady. She was the goddess Chandi herself who had been emerged from the iguana. But Fullora did not know anything about it. She asked the young lady about her introduction. At this the young lady disclosed that she had been brought by Kalaketu and, therefore, desired to live in that house. Fullora was very much shocked at the decision of the young lady as it very naturally might bring bitterness in the conjugal life of Kalaketu and Fullora. Fullora began to discourage the young lady in taking her firm decision by describing their utter poverty and also the morality and chastity of the women, but to no effect. Fullora then rushed to Kalaketu who then came to that young lady and became surprised to see her beauty. He too implored her to give up her

decision to reside in Kalaketu's house. But the lady concerned did not respond to that request. It enraged Kalaketu and suddenly he brought out the arrow and began to shoot at the lady. At that particular moment Chandi appeared before Kalaketu and his wife in her original form. Both of them became astonished at the unique appearance of goddess Chandi. As a sign of affection Chandi offered them seven pitchers full of gold coins together with one gold ring and asked them to establish a city. Kalaketu did accordingly. In course of time the city came into being by the blessings of Chandi. A man named Bhanru Dutta approached Kalaketu to become his minister but he was turned away. Bhanru Dutta felt insulted and was keen to take revenge. Bhanru Dutta was a very bad-natured person and he instigated the King of Kalinga to declare war against Kalaketu. Bhanru Dutta used some clever tricks to win over the mind of the King of Kalinga. In due course Kalaketu was attacked by the King of Kalinga and the former was defeated. Kalaketu was taken to the prison where he began to sing in praise of Chandi. At this Chandi became pleased and she gave instruction, through dream, to the King of Kalinga that Kalaketu was her favourite devotee and he should be released from imprisonment. She also ordered the king to return his kingdom. The King of Kalinga immediately released Kalaketu and he gave him active support in reorganising the lost kingdom. Then in an auspicious moment Kalaketu and Fullora took the original appearance of Nilambar and Chhaya, and set out for the paradise—their original place of residence.

II

There was a luxurious young merchant named Dhanapati at Ujaninagar. While he was playing with his pet pigeon, the latter, being chased by a falcon took shelter under the gem of Khullana, a beautiful lady. Dhanapati began to search for his pigeon and in course of time he reached Khullana but she refused to return the pigeon in question. Dhanapati sent a proposal to the guardian of Khullana to marry her, Dhanapati was a famous man so far as his family tradition and economic conditions were concerned, and naturally he did not find any difficulty in getting his proposal fulfilled. But Dhanapati's first wife

became angry on hearing the news. At last she was compelled to give her permission after being heavily bribed by her husband in the form of gold ornaments. After the marriage, Dhanapati had to start for Gauda to serve the order of the king. He left Khullana, the newly-married wife, under the direct care of Lahana. The latter began to look at Khullana with great affection. On seeing the amicable relationship between them the maid-servant was not happy as she would not be benefited if there was no quarrel between the co-wives. She began to instigate Lahana against her co-wife by making some false complaints. The maid-servant did not hesitate to take the help of different black magical performances for making her an eyesore of Dhanapati. But she failed to do it. At last she took another device to make her mission successful. She managed to send Lahana to her co-wife, Khullana, with a forged letter of Dhanapati which instructed the latter to tend goats, to lie down in the shed where the husking lever is installed, to remain half-fed and to wear coarse cloth. But Khullana was intelligent enough to realise the tricks and thereby she refused to follow the instruction of the letter. Lahana began to force her to do the same and at last she was successful. On being oppressed by her co-wife, Khullana had to take shelter in the forest where she had to tend goats regularly. One day she became very exhausted and fell asleep under a tree. She had a dream, when goddess Chandi herself told her that the goats had been eaten by jackals. Khullana became panic-stricken on getting that message and she began to search for the goats. While traversing through the forest in search of her goats Khullana met five divine women who taught her the procedures of propitiation to goddess Chandi. Khullana then worshipped Chandi in the forest. The goddess became satisfied and making her appearance before Khullana, she gave her blessing for peaceful life with husband and children. On the other hand, the goddess instructed Lahana, through dream, to look after Khullana with due love and affection as was done before. Lahana began to lament on getting the instruction of goddess Chandi. She began to treat Khullana with sincerity and affection. Dhanapati began to enjoy his life with extreme luxury at Gauda after forgetting his wives. Goddess Chandi gave him a message, through dream, regarding Lahana's ill-treatment to Khullana. At this Dhanapati returned home

immediately. On getting the news of his arrival Lahana dressed herself in a beautiful way and went to see her husband. On that particular day a large number of distinguished persons were invited at Dhanapati's residence. Dhanapati asked Khullana to cook for the guests but it was objected by Lahana on the ground of Khullana's lack of skill in cooking. It produced no result, Khullana went to cook for the invited guests. The food she cooked became very tasty due to the blessing of Chandi herself. The guests began to praise Khullana for the relishing dishes. Then came the funeral ceremony of Dhanapati's father. A large number of relatives attended the ceremony but they refused to take any food due to Khullana's bad reputation. A point was raised regarding her chastity when she took shelter in the forest and tended goats there. They declared that unless the chastity of Khullana was tested by an ordeal, they would not take any food and drink at Dhanapati's house. It might be waived if Dhanapati paid one lakh of rupees as compensation.

Dhanapati rebuked Lahana for the conspiracy and he assured Khullana to pay the compensation. But Khullana did not agree to that proposal. She knew that the payment of compensation was not sufficient to solve that problematic issue. She was ready to prove her chastity through an ordeal. Khullana took her stand before the large gathering. She was drowned in a tank and thrown before the poisonous fangs of cobra but to no effect. At last she was placed inside a house built with lac and it was set to fire. But Khullana came out unaffected. The chastity of Khullana saved her from all sorts of danger. After some days Dhanapati had to start for Ceylon on an urgent piece of business. Khullana was pregnant at that time. The time for starting the voyage was not auspicious, but Dhanapati did not care it. Khullana started worshipping goddess Chandi for the overall welfare and safe voyage of her husband.

Dhanapati was a Saivite. Lahana took the chance of enraging Dhanapati against Khullana. She intimated the fact of Khullana's worship to goddess Chandi. Dhanapati became furious on hearing the news. He kicked at the goddess and went out to sail. Goddess Chandi took her revenge when Dhanapati's vessel reached the vast ocean. The six out of seven vessels went down in water one by one. Dhanapati lost everything and he

anyhow managed to reach Ceylon with the last vessel. On the way to Ceylon goddess Chandi showed Dhanapati the image of 'Kamale-Kamini'¹² (the female deity described as sitting on a lotus floating in the sea and gorging and disgorging an elephant continuously). The King of Ceylon showed due respect to Dhanapati. When Dhanapati discussed the hardships of the voyage with the king, he mentioned the fact of viewing the 'Kamale-Kamini' on the vast ocean. But the king did not believe it. Dhanapati repeatedly told the king about the mysterious happenings. The king asked Dhanapati to show him the 'Kamale-Kamini' as described by him (Dhanapati). If he succeeded, he would be rewarded by the gift of half of the kingdom. Otherwise, Dhanapati would be thrown into the life-long imprisonment. Dhanapati agreed to that proposal but ultimately he failed to show the king the desired 'Kamale-Kamini'. Goddess Chandi deceived Dhanapati at that time. Dhanapati was taken to the prison as per promise.

In the meantime, Khullana gave birth to a male child. He was named as Srimanta. From his very childhood Srimanta showed intelligence and bravery. When he attained six years of age, he was admitted to the village *pathsala*. One day he cut a joke with the *guru*, the teacher of the *pathsala*; it enraged the latter and he casted a side-glance about Srimanta's father. Srimanta felt insulted and he immediately set out for Ceylon in search of his father. The king of the country repeatedly requested him to cancel the voyage over the unknown sea; the mother burst into tears. But nobody could stop him from going to Ceylon.

On reaching Ceylon Srimanta told the king about his celebrated observation of 'Kamale-Kamini' in the vast ocean. But nobody believed that story. The King of Ceylon told him "if you can show me the 'Kamale-Kamini', I will offer you the half of my kingdom and my daughter would be married to you. If you fail, you would be beheaded at the southern crematorium". But Srimanta also was deceived by goddess Chandi. Srimanta failed to show the 'Kamale-Kamini' as per his promise to the king. Srimanta was brought to the southern crematorium for beheading. Finding no other alternative Srimanta began to sing in the praise of Chandi as soon as he reached the crematorium. At this goddess Chandi reached the crematorium and ordered

her ghostly companion to drive away the king's attendants. Goddess Chandi took Srimanta on her lap. The King of Ceylon could see the 'Kamale-Kamini'—by the grace of goddess Chandi. Then there was a happy union of the father and the son—Srimanta was married to Sushila, the princess of Ceylon. The father and the son then started for home and through the mercy of goddess Chandi, Dhanapati got back all his vessels together with the lost materials. All of them then took immediate steps for making a grand arrangement for the worship of goddess Chandi which ultimately spread at the different corners of the country.

Manasa

Manasa is a popular deity and her tremendous influence is seen in each and every village of the region under study. Though this particular goddess is seen to be worshipped in the perspectives of the diverse thoughts and ideas throughout India, yet her absence in the Vedic traditions is conspicuous. The snake worship is extensively found not only in India but in other parts of the world from time immemorial. Pre-Aryan India was very much influenced by the snake cults which were established on diverse principles. Serpent worship was very much prevalent in the ancient civilization of Harappa. The seals of the Mahenjodaro and also its potteries threw considerable light on the propitiation of the serpents. In a particular seal two figures of cobra are to be seen along with the figures of Siva and his devotees. In some seals snakes are to be found in association with the trees. Traces of snake cult have also been established from the various remains of potteries decorated with the figures of snakes from the different layers of excavated site of Indus valley civilization. In Indian tradition a reciprocal relationship between the snakes and the trees is to be largely felt. In the Deccan, the *pipal* tree is said to have a close relationship with the snakes. Devotees offer clay or stone-carved snakes at the feet of the trees for having children. The snakes and the trees are regarded as the symbols of fertility. In the region under study the *si* manasa (*Cactus Indianis*) tree is believed to have a close link with the snakes. Sometimes the snake goddess Manasa is symbolized by a twig of this tree. The Bodo of Assam regard this particular tree with special veneration and

they worship the different deities at the foot of the *sij* tree. A stone-curved *sij* tree has been discovered from the Bodo villages in Assam which depicts the antiquity of the *sij* tree worship among the tribe in question.

Serpent worship was prevalent among the different religious sects in ancient India. In almost all the cases the snake and the tree have become fused together in the formation of a cultural background of serpent worship. It is very difficult to say with certainty how and when the personification of snake gods or goddesses took place. But it is apprehended that this phenomenon came into effect when the large scale personification of the Vedic natural deities began to receive human forms at a very rapid pace. During this period many non-Aryan animal deities were personified. It is probable that the planning of the establishment of the snake goddess Manasa is the outcome of this period. The name Manasa, according to some erudite scholars, has been derived from a non-sanskritic word and it has got no direct relations with the Sanskrit vocabulary (Bhattacharya, 1958: 181). The name of Manasa is to be found in the aboriginal religious lore of India. Among the Oraons of Chhotanagpur a deity is worshipped who is known as Manasa—the mistress of the snakes. They sacrifice fowls before the deity and treat the cases of snake-bites through various charms in the name of the goddess of snakes. The Kurmi of Hazaribagh district, the Santals of the Santal Parganas have possessed deep faith in the goddess of snakes—Manasa. The Ho of Singhbhum arrange special worship to Manasa though they do not have any idol. The deity in question is worshipped by them with great reverence. But Manasa cult has reached its peak in Bengal which is the abode of so many non-Aryan deities. The influence of Manasa is extensively felt here especially as the rural settings abound in snakes of different varieties. In the region of study Manasa is not only extensively worshipped but it is said to be the place of development and progress of Manasa cult from the very ancient period. Here the lower caste people, viz., Bauri, Bagdi, Dom, etc., are the chief patrons of goddess Manasa. This goddess of snakes has gradually infiltrated into the greater fold of higher caste religious traditions. A number of folk ballads have been composed by the village poets of the then Bengal depicting the great influence of Manasa and her

gradual entry in the higher fold of Hinduism. The famous *Manasa-Mangal Kavya*¹³ or the epic narrating the glory of Manasa is principally based on the facts of infiltration of the goddess from the aboriginal cultural phase to the wider horizon of greater Hindu traditions.

Chand Sadagar—a great merchant—was a Saivite in the strict sense of the term. One day while he was plucking flowers in the garden of Paradise for the propitiation of Siva he entered a dense forested region. Goddess Manasa was seated there and she was completely clad by snakes. Owing to the sudden appearance of Chand the snakes became frightened and they went away leaving Manasa without any covering on her person. Manasa was annoyed with Chand and she cursed him by saying that Chand would take his birth in the earth as a common man. Chand became embarrassed at this and he emphasised that if Manasa cursed him due to no fault of his, she would not receive any propitiation by the people of the world until and unless she was worshipped by Chand.

Chand took his birth in the earth as the son of Vijoy Saint and in course of time he grew up. He was married to Sanaka who was a propitiator of Manasa. But she used to adore Manasa in a hidden way and Chand did not know anything about it. But one day Chand suddenly came to know all about Sanaka's secret attempt of worshipping Manasa. Chand became furious at that and he entered the inner recess of the house and kicked out the *Manasa-ghat*.¹⁴

As a natural consequence Manasa became angry and she decided to take revenge. Manasa took all possible steps to destroy the various works of Chand. The palatial residence of Chand along with its picturesque garden fell down in the twinkling of an eye. All his relatives and neighbours started to lose their lives due to snake-bites. Manasa had sent the snakes—her companions—to give a death blow to the well-organised kingdom of Chand. But Chand was the possessor of *mahajnan*, and with the help of which he was able to retrieve all his lost property. Besides this Chand had one intimate friend named Sankar Garrhi, who was a famous ojha for curing the cases of snake-bites. Sankar Garrhi was the disciple of Neta. Manasa approached the wife of Sankar Garrhi and tactfully came to know the actual way of his death. Manasa then killed Sankar

Garrhi which made Chand completely helpless. In due course Manasa deceived Chand and stole away the *mahajnan* possessed by him. Manasa then mixed poison in the food-stuff of the six children of Chand who immediately lost their lives. After the mishap Manasa appeared before Chand and told him that he would get back his sons and the *mahajnan* provided Chand worshipped her. But Chand became enraged with Manasa and he took a stick made of *hental* (a kind of tree) wood to strike Manasa because of the proposal for worshipping her. Sanaka became afraid of Chand's behaviour towards Manasa. She held the feet of her husband and requested him to worship Manasa for getting back their sons. But Chand did not agree to it.

The two fishermen brothers, Jalu and Malu, arranged for worshipping Manasa. On getting the news Sanaka secretly went there and prayed for the welfare of her husband before the goddess. Manasa was pleased and blessed Sanaka for having a son. But there was no condition—Sanaka's son would lose his life due to snake-bite on the very night of his marriage. Sanaka did not bother for it and she was overwhelmed with joy in getting a son.

In course of time Chand was preparing to sail out for business and for that reason he loaded his merchandise in fourteen vessels. Just on the eve of departure Manasa appeared before Chand and asked him to worship her before starting for the sea. Chand again drove Manasa away. On reaching the place of trade, Chand made good profit by selling his merchandise. He then filled up his empty vessels with precious commodities and arranged for returning home. While the vessels were sailing in the mid-sea Manasa appeared again before Chand and asked him to worship her. Chand was very much frantic and he told sharply that he would not worship the one-eyed deity by the hand which was exclusively devoted to the propitiation of Lord Siva.

Manasa went away from Chand—her last hope was nipped in the bud. She then took recourse to other tactics. Manasa brought cyclonic storm over the wide river, which made it very rough. Chand was in danger with his heavily loaded vessels. The roughness of the river continued to increase which ultimately drowned all the vessels of Chand. But Chand alone remained alive and he was floating on the river. As he floated

he saw a pillow, a raft, one by one; but he refused to catch those as those materials, he understood, were sent by Manasa herself. At last he reached the shore. Then Chand roamed about here and there in profound distress for twelve years. During this period he used to earn his livelihood in a very precarious condition.

After the long period of twelve years when Chand managed to come back to his home—Champaknagar—no body could recognise him. He was so ill-clad and so disfigured that the people of Champaknagar took him as a ghost. All of them were ready to kill him; but fortunately he was recognised by Sanaka. Chand described the full story before the people of Champaknagar. He was very much delighted to see his son Lakhindar in full youth. Chand forgot all the distress and wanted to re-establish the family peace by arranging for the marriage of Lakhindar. But a rumour circulated throughout the length and breadth of the country that Lakhindar would die on the wedding night by snake-bite. So, everybody was reluctant to marry his daughter with Lakhindar. At last marriage was settled with Behula—the daughter of the merchant Sāhe at Ujani. To protect the life of Lakhindar on the marriage night, an iron-made compact bridal chamber was constructed by Chand. But the destiny of Lakhindar could not be avoided. A snake entered through a small hole left by the architect and, by order of Manasa, the snake had bitten Lakhindar when both were sleeping inside the iron chamber. Lakhindar died within a few minutes. Everybody rushed to the spot on hearing the news of mishap. Chand and Sanaka saw their son breathe his last due to the rage of Manasa.

As per system of the day the dead body of Lakhindar was made ready to float on a raft of banana stumps in the river Ganguri. Behula made up her mind to accompany her dead husband on the raft in the hope of getting back his life. Chand tried to detract Behula from her decision. But Behula was firm in her determination. Behula rode on the raft with the head of the deceased husband on her lap. The raft began to float on the water of Ganguri river. Chand and Sanaka lamented and the attending crowd looked on with sympathy.

The raft was stopped by some unscrupulous persons at different times but Behula tactfully overcame all the difficulties.

One day Behula was stopped by an ugly-looking wicked man named Goda, who wanted to marry Behula. But Behula cursed him. Then she was attacked by a group of gamblers whom she pacified by giving them gold ornaments. After this she was attacked by vultures and then by tiger. In the latter case Behula escaped through the intervention of Manasa.

At last the raft reached the *ghat* of Neta, the celestial washerwoman. She was engaged in washing the clothes of the gods and goddesses of the heaven. She was accompanied by her son. Before starting for work, she put her son to death. After she had finished her washing, she brought the child back to life. Behula minutely noticed the phenomenon from close quarters. She realised that the washerwoman had got some supernatural power. Behula approached her with the prayer of helping her in getting back the life of Lakhindar. She told Behula that the life of Lakhindar was lost due to the rage of Manasa. Therefore, she should approach the gods and goddesses of the heaven. As per Neta's guidance and instruction, Behula entered into the court of Indra where she started dancing. The gods and goddesses were very much pleased to enjoy the rhythmic dance of Behula. Siva was very much impressed and he wanted to offer blessings to Behula. On being enquired about the actual nature of the blessings to be offered by Siya, Behula begged very politely the life of her deceased husband. Siva agreed to it and he asked Manasa to do the work accordingly. Manasa agreed to return the life of Lakhindar on the condition that Behula's father-in-law Chand should pay his homage to her. Behula agreed to it and she gave her word to Manasa in that regard. Behula requested Manasa to arrange for returning the lives of Chand's six sons, who had died of snake-bite, the drowned fourteen vessels with their cargoes and crews. Manasa did it instantaneously.

Then Behula, accompanied by Lakhindar, began to proceed towards home. In course of time Behula reached the *ghat* of Ganguri, from where she had departed with the corpse of Lakhindar, his six brothers and fourteen vessels with full of merchandise. On hearing the news Chand rushed to the spot and he was overwhelmed with joy on seeing the return of everything by Behula's virtue. All the people of Champaknagar assembled at the *ghat* of Ganguri to pay their reverence to the

great *sati* Behula. There was immense joy and merry-making throughout the length and breadth of the country. Behula proceeded towards Chand and the latter embraced her with heartful of love and gratitude. Behula told him the whole story of her journey to the heaven and how she was able to satisfy the goddess Manasa to get back the lives of Lakhindar, his six brothers and also to recover the lost property of Chand. She also reminded Chand the oath taken before Manasa in connection with her worship to be made by Chand himself. On hearing this Chand received a great shock—he was not prepared for this. He did not face such a conflicting situation in life. Behula requested him once again to pay homage to Manasa for the sake of his sons and other members of his family. But Chand told Behula that his right hand had been dedicated to offer worship to the Siva. So, if necessary, he would be able to worship Manasa by his left hand. He also added that during worship he would turn back. Behula fully agreed to it. Then the goddess Manasa was established in a temple inside the house of Chand and all arrangements were made to worship her in a grand way. Chand came to the place of worship with his attendants and took some flowers by his left hand; and after turning back side he threw these flowers to goddess Manasa. Manasa was much pleased in getting the worship of Chand which was followed by the worship of all the people of the world.

This is the universal story depicting the spread of worship of Manasa throughout the country. In addition to it there are some stories which highlight the trend of development of Manasa cult in the region as a whole. It may be pointed out that the region under study is very much influenced by the various thoughts and ideas centering round the cult of Manasa. The folk-customs and folk-beliefs of the region are impregnated by tremendous influence of goddess Manasa. Scholars are of opinion that the story of *Manasa-Mangal* had been enriched in a certain part of Birbhum district and from which it had been diffused to other regions of Bengal (Bhattacharya, 1958: 216). In the region under study a quite different story is heard which has been described in brief.

There was a merchant; he had seven sons and seven daughters-in-law. The customary gifts came from the paternal

houses of all the daughters-in-law excepting the youngest one. For this reason the mother-in-law was not satisfied with the youngest daughter-in-law. One rainy day all the daughters-in-law expressed their will to take special type of food as per individual liking. The youngest one was pregnant and she intended to take boiled rice steeped overnight in water together with sour curry of fish. All the daughters-in-law went out to take bath in the pond when the youngest daughter-in-law saw a shoal of fish. There was a jungle in the neighbouring area where eight snakes (*Astha Nag*)¹⁶ used to live. Owing to the occurrence of forest fire the eight snakes took shelter in the pond in the form of fishes. The youngest daughter-in-law caught the fishes with the help of her napkin and those were carried to home. It was surprising that on the following day all the fishes became snakes. The youngest daughter-in-law began to tend the snakes by offering them milk and banana. After a few days the snakes went away to their mother—the goddess Manasa—in the heaven. The snakes described the care and affection of the youngest daughter-in-law to their mother. On hearing this Manasa went out to bring the youngest daughter-in-law in the heaven. Manasa came down to the earth in the guise of an old woman and entered the house of the merchant. Manasa introduced herself as the maternal aunt of the youngest daughter-in-law and asked for the formal permission from her mother-in-law to take away the youngest daughter-in-law to her home. After this Manasa entered into the cart with the youngest daughter-in-law and asked the latter to close her eyes. The cart reached the heaven within a moment and then Manasa instructed the youngest daughter-in-law to open her eyes. She was surprised to see the palatial building, where she also met those eight snakes. Manasa told the youngest daughter-in-law that she would arrange for her daily worship; the milk for the eight snake-brothers should be boiled and in no case she should look to the south. But the youngest daughter-in-law became very much curious to cast her glance at the south. When she did it, she saw Manasa was dancing vigorously and she became completely absorbed. She forgot to boil the milk for the snake-brothers. As soon as the dancing of Manasa stopped, she hurriedly went to boil the milk and served it to the snake-brothers. The milk was so hot that the mouths of eight snakes

burnt and they became furious. They decided to bite the youngest daughter-in-law. But Manasa stopped them to bite her in the heaven. Manasa also told them that the youngest daughter-in-law was being sent to her residence in the earth where the eight snakes might fulfil their desire. The youngest daughter-in-law was sent to her residence by Manasa, who gave an instruction to the former that her snake-brothers became very angry and, therefore, she should do her level best to praise the snake-brothers for getting their sympathy. Manasa sent the youngest daughter-in-law to her father-in-law's house with gorgeous ornaments on one side of the body, the other side was left bare. The family members started cutting jokes at this. The youngest daughter-in-law readily replied, "Let my eight snake-brothers live long. I do not have any thing wanting. They have given me the ornament on one side of the body—the other side will also be covered by them with ornaments". At that time the eight snake-brothers were roaming about at the back side of the house. They were so pleased with the remarks made by the youngest daughter-in-law that they immediately gave up their former decision to bite her. They returned to the heaven and told Manasa that they were very much pleased with the youngest daughter-in-law. At the will of the eight snake-brothers Manasa arranged to cover the bare part of the body of youngest daughter-in-law with gold ornaments. Manasa appeared before her and gave her real introduction by saying that "I am not your maternal aunt, but the goddess Manasa herself. I stay on the *sij* manasa tree, you arrange for my worship on the earth. On the days of *Nagpanchami*¹⁶ and *Dasahara*¹⁷ bring the twig of *sij* manasa and then arrange to worship. The last day of *Bhadra* (August-September) should be observed as the day of *arandhan*¹⁸ (abstaining from cooking) and I should be offered with a plateful of rice soaked overnight in water associated with cold curries. There would be no fear of snakes if these were followed carefully". With these words Manasa suddenly vanished. Then the youngest daughter-in-law described the whole happenings in details to every body. From that moment people began to worship Manasa with great reverence. In course of time the worship of Manasa spread at the different parts of the country.

Kali

The goddess Kali is a very well-known deity—the influence of this particular deity is to be seen right from the most sophisticated religious community to the aboriginal religious spheres. The goddess Kali is remarkable in the socio-religious activities in India due to her universalization in the various cultural levels. Though the goddess Kali has been described as a form of power goddess Chandika in the *Tantra*, yet there are so many evidences of the non-Aryan origin of the goddess in question. The legends in India indicate the Sakti cult to the remote pre-Aryan tradition. The different traditional elements and also the grotesqueness of the idol itself are sufficient enough to establish the antiquity in the cult of the goddess Kali. It has been seen that the goddess Kali has entered into the mythological literature of Indian religion through the *Tantra*. It has been understood from the integrated study that the goddess Kali was very powerful deity in the non-Aryan religious sphere. In the latter period various successful attempts have been made to give the deity an Aryan background in the different religious texts like *Linga Purana*¹⁹, *Brahmavaivarta Purana*, *Kalika Purana*, etc. In some Puranas she has been described as identical with the goddess Chandi, but there are numerous distinctive non-Aryan features in the nature of the goddess Kali. The significance of the goddess Kali is that she does not correspond to any other deity in the peculiarity of her image and also in the nature of her worship. She possesses a unique figure of the terrible and sublime in fusion—a symbol of fear and love. She offers blessings and benedictions and also gives assurance with her two right hands, while the two left hands are engaged in holding an upright sword and a freshly severed human head. She would be found in the dancing posture with the steps forwarded on the static passive body of her consort. Her neck is decorated with a garland of human heads and she wears a girdle of human hands. Her ear-rings are seen to be made of two dead human babies.

Scholars are of opinion that goddess Kali is not the original product of Bengali's non-Aryan religious philosophy. It is very probable that the goddess has originated from a non-Aryan sphere far away from Bengal and in due course she has entered in the region through the *Tantra* and the Puranas. Some trace

the relationship of the goddess Kali with the head-hunting activities of the Nagas of Assam. At one time head-hunting was a wide-spread and essential practice among the Nagas who, most of the time, used to decorate themselves with the chopped off heads of men. The garlands of chopped off human heads round the neck of the goddess Kali might have got some inherent relationship with the customary practices of the Nagas (Bhattacharya, 1958 : 657). Everywhere the goddess Kali is worshipped as a symbol of strength and vigour. According to the fulfilment of the different purposes Kali has got various nature and names, e.g., *Bhadrakali*, *Raksha Kali*, *Dakshina Kali*, *Smasan Kali*, *Nishi Kali*, *Mahakali*, etc. The goddess Kali is now depicted as the consort of Siva; but, it is to be noted that this particular goddess possesses a very remote background in which the reflections of the present-day Hindu pantheon are totally absent.

In the region under study the worship of the goddess Kali is prevalent among the lower caste people. Kali is worshipped here along with the other non-Aryan deities and they do not engage any Brahmin priest for the purpose. They do not follow the *tantric* way of worshipping the goddess, but they adhere to the indigenous path which seems to have been coming down through generations unaffected by the Brahminical traditions. The dacoits of this region were in the regular habit of worshipping the goddess Kali before their starting off for committing dacoity. The *Dakatey Kali* of Bengal was a very common affair in the days gone by. They were worshipped in the purely *tantric* way. A number of references of this sort of Kali have been found in some ancient literature. In the 'Chaitannya Bhagat' it is seen that the two thieves are asking the help of the goddess Kali in stealing the child Chaitannya. In the 'Dharmamangal' the same goddess is being worshipped before the act of stealing the child Lausen. There are a large number of ballads and folk stories centering round this particular type of deity in Bengal.

In *Kalikamangal* there is a fine story which depicts the association of the goddess Kali with the secret love affairs of the two youths—Vidya and Sundar. A prince was engaged in the worship of *Bhadrakali* in the dead hours of night. The name of the prince was Sundar. The goddess became satisfied by the propitiation and she appeared before Sundar to offer blessings to him. When Sundar was asked by the goddess to point out exact nature of

blessing, Sundar expressed his desire to meet the princess Vidya at a secret place. The goddess Kali agreed to that proposal and gave him a parrot which would help him in the secret meeting with the princess. Sundar then started with the parrot to meet with Vidya at the kingdom of her father. At last he reached the capital and there he was taking rest under a tree. A female florist came to that place to sell her garlands. She was the royal florist. Sundar introduced himself as a foreigner and through some sympathetic conversation could readily win over the heart of the female florist. She took Sundar to her home. Sundar began to call her as maternal aunt. Sundar heard about intellectual attainments of Vidya from the florist and also he came to know Vidya's promise in connection with her marriage. She decided that she would marry that particular boy who would be able to defeat her in intelligence. On hearing this Sundar became impatient to meet Vidya. One day the florist went to the palace with garlands when a special type of garland together with a small note describing the introduction of Sundar was offered to Vidya. On getting the writing Vidya was attracted to Sundar and she told the florist that she would like to meet her nephew when taking bath in the tank. Both of them met as per prior arrangement. Sundar communicated her through secret tryst that he would meet Vidya at night. But when night came, Sundar became perplexed. Finding no other alternative he prayed before the goddess Kali to help him in making way into the inner recess of the palace. The goddess Kali appeared before Sundar and told him that in consequence of her blessing a tunnel would be created connecting the residence of the florist with the personal room of Vidya. According to the particular arrangement Sundar began to meet Vidya daily without the knowledge of any one in the palace. They married secretly following the *gandharva* form of marriage. In course of time Vidya became pregnant. A maid-servant brought the news of pregnancy to the queen. The queen immediately came to Vidya and started rebuking her. When the king came to know the affair, he ordered the *kotwal* to find out the man who secretly enters into Vidya's room and kill him then and there. He made continuous attempts to catch the man concerned but failed. Sundar was maintaining regular connection with Vidya as usual. At last the *kotwal* made a trick. He applied vermilion on the floors and on all other materials in

the room of Vidya. When Sundar came to Vidya, his clothes took the colour of vermillion. *Kotwal* went to the washerman's house where he found the cloth dyed with vermillion. He could readily trace the man with the help of the washerman. Sundar was then brought to the king who gave the order of severing his head from the body. The royal executioner brought Sundar to the *smasan*. Sundar began to pray the goddess Kali there. The goddess appeared and she asked the king to offer his daughter Vidya to Sundar. On getting the proper introduction of Sundar the king immediately agreed to do so. Sundar was ceremonially married to Vidya and then she was taken to Sundar's residence. Thus the story ends.

However, the antiquity of the goddess Kali cannot be denied. From the remote past to the present day the goddess Kali has been and is being approached to tide over the crises of life. Chanda observes three different basic elements in the goddess Kali which have together given the deity a particular identity. These have been noted as, (a) the fertility and the nutritive principles of the mother or the mother earth, (b) the destructive element in nature, and (c) the life force (Chanda, R.P. 1916 : 47). Mention may be made that these basic elements in the formulation of the deity in question are largely to be found in active forms and functions in the propitiation of the goddess by the lower caste people discussed elsewhere in this chapter.

Mahadana

Mahadana is not a very common village deity. He is not commonly found in the villages of the region under study, but when present, he commands the most essential aspects of life of the locality. The deity is a kind of spirit and, therefore, no image is seen in the shrine of Mahadana. It is suggested that Mahadana means the great demon-god who is as fierce as well as useful deity. Mahadana is practically the village guardian deity and is said to be the chief controller of the various malevolent spirits roaming about here and there at dead hours of night. He is considered as the leader of the host of evil spirits and if he is kept satisfied by occasional offerings and sacrifices, he would prevent the demon bands from doing any ill effect on the villagers.

Mahadana or Mahadania is a characteristic demon-god in tribal India. Tribal people are proverbially being oppressed by

demonophobia. They subscribe to the belief that the country is haunted by the evil spirits of different kinds. They should be propitiated lest they should do harm. S.C. Roy has pointed out Mahadania spirit among the Oraons of Chhotanagpur. Formerly, human sacrifice was regularly made before the deity. A special priest was deputed, known as 'Mahadania-pahan' to officiate in the worship of Mahadania. The Oraons believe that if Mahadania spirit is not properly worshipped at the appointed time, a terrible epidemic would appear and take a heavy toll of human lives. The Kharias, according to Roy, propitiate Mahadana the shrine of which is to be found at the foot-hill in the Kharia locality. During the worship of the spirit the priest prays, on behalf of the villagers for a trouble-free life. The people jointly pray for protecting them from the attack of diseases and also from the evil spirits. The existence of demon guardian in South Indian villages is a very common affair. The *Aiyangar* or "honourable father" is to be found in the villages of South India. He is described as the ruler of the spirits haunting in the fields, mountains and rivers. He moves about here and there mounting on a horse or elephant. He holds a sword in his hand to clear the evil spirits from the land and water. If a man or woman happens to meet him in this position, he or she would die immediately. *Vetale* is the name of the Deccan guardian spirit who appears as a goblin. He also rides on a horse. His appearance is mostly human but the hands and feet are directed backward. *Chandui*, the name of another demon guardian, lives in marshes and he exerts evil influence on human beings specially on the children. He is appeased by regular worship. The Reddis of Bijapur possess a field demon guardian who is represented by a stone smeared with red lead. His seat is to be found under a sacred tree. Before ploughing, the demon guardian should be properly worshipped.

It can easily be said that demonolatry has been developed independent of Brahminism and it is amorphous and without any sacred texts or established priesthood. Scholars are of opinion that these groups of hostile powers have been derived from pre-animistic beliefs. The Mahadana found in the villages in the region of study is regarded as the all-village demon-god though the organisers of the worships belong to the lower caste people. The extensive use of country-made liquor, absence of any form

of *mantras* for worship and the sacrifice of fowls, ducks, pigeons together with goats give the deity a non-orthodox tradition.

Mahadana is always seen to be associated with some sort of popular narratives. These are greatly influenced by the tremendous malevolent activities to those who do not have deep faith in him. Sometimes the area of approach is extended to other religious spheres, specially of Islam, by the help of some well-organised tales depicting the multifarious power of Mahadana. Mahadana exerts direct influence on the land and people of all castes and communities in the day-to-day life and activities.

Dharmaraj, Chandi, Manasa, Mahadana and Kali—these five are regarded as the tutelary deities of the region in question. These principal village deities not only exert tremendous influence on the ritualistic life of the people but also they act as the most important factor in the socio-cultural setting of the locality. People, irrespective of castes and communities, approach these deities at the different times of the year to pay homage and also to intimate them with humble submission all the stresses and strains of life. Various oral narratives centering round the development of each of these deities indicate that a slight negligence in showing proper respect to them would bring calamity. As a necessary consequence, no body thinks of remaining indifferent during the propitiation of these deities of the villages. The economy of these villages is principally based on agriculture which is directly dependent on various ecological and climatic factors. The uncertainty in the economic sphere on which is based the smooth running of the day-to-day living impel the people of the locality to remain in close contact with the deities so that the natural calamities may be checked to a considerable extent. The villagers have been spending their days, from time immemorial, in utter uncertainty so far as their health and hygiene are concerned. The sudden mishaps in connection with the human existence such as epidemic, catching of fire in the straw-thatched houses, snake-bites, wrath of supernatural malevolent spirits cause a situation of stress and people concerned find no other alternative but to approach these deities believed to be the experts in controlling as well as driving out the root cause of the misfortunes of man. Besides the critical conditions of human life and activities, the people of this locality do not forget to pray for the blessings of these deities during the enjoyable

and happiest moment, such as marriage ceremonies, reaping of the good harvest of the year and the connected festivals.

The intention behind the propitiation of these deities is never totally adhered to the religious spheres only; the people concerned do not crave for any immediate merit to be gained through reverential propitiations of the deities in question. But on the contrary, they draw near the deities either with some concrete problems of day-to-day life for solution or with the profound gratitude for fulfilment of desire. Thus, the significance of worship of these deities is somewhat different from that of the orthodox deities of the traditional Hindu pantheon. The long narratives or simply the popular beliefs that have developed round each of these deities categorically pin-point the close relationship between the deities and their worshippers. At the time of appearance in the earth for receiving propitiation from mankind all these deities are linked up with the most insignificant events of the daily routine work of man belonging to the lower caste people. Unlike the deities of the orthodox traditional Hindu pantheon, their activities are conditional. Persons who have got full faith in them and have shown proper reverence through worship are blessed with unequalled prosperity. But the persons who do not care for their proper propitiation, face boundless catastrophe. The development of this particular viewpoint in the background of these deities led to a situation, which, in due course, started universalization. To cope with that process people belonging to diverse castes and communities throughout the length and breadth of the country come to these deities with due submission. Therefore, the nature of the propitiation of these deities developed in the very soil of the country and grew in the indigenous climate and cultural setting is, in fact, tradition-bound as well as is provided with deep-rooted background.

NOTES

1. The Vedic gods who exert numerous influence on the life and activities of the universe. Surya was the chief sun-god and in course of time Savitri and Vivasvat were absorbed. Surya is provided with golden hair and arms who rides a golden chariot drawn by seven horses. Surya is generally considered to be the son of Dyaus. Surya

is thought to be the benefactor of man. He is regarded as the slayer of demons. There are occasions when dreadful rakshasas attempted to devour him, but he destroyed them by his light. Varuna is regarded as the prime mover of the universe. He is pictured as creating the Universe; by exercising his creative will, i.e., *maya* and using the sun as his instrument he measures the three worlds. He causes rain to fall on the ground and the rivers to flow. Thus, he is embodied in his creation. In latter periods it is seen that Varuna travels through his realm riding on a monster fish known as *makara*, who is provided with the head of a deer and the legs of antelope. The snakes and demons are his attendants, sometimes he is seen to be surrounded by a troop of a thousand white horses. Yama is such a type of god who is feared as well as respected. He is the presiding god of both the delightful abode of the Manes or Pitris and the hell, a place of punishment. It is Yama who keeps the great Book of Destiny. Man's various activities are clearly recorded in the pages of this Great Book. After consulting this Book Yama can understand the time of death of a particular person when he sends his messengers to fetch the person concerned. He rides a buffalo and carries a heavy mace and noose in his hands. Yama is other named by Dharmaraj when he is considered as the judge of the dead.

2. Loue goat has got special importance in the worship of Dharmaraj. Goats are sacrificed in large number before the deity. There is a regular custom to let the he-goats free in the name of Dharmaraj even two or three years before the actual event of sacrifice. Whitehead also observed such custom in South India. "The buffaloes devoted for sacrifice are generally chosen sometimes beforehand by people who make vows in sickness or trouble, and then allowed to roam about the village at will" (1916: 107). During Gharbhara ceremony two goats are sacrificed, one of which is known as Loue. The chopped off head of the Loue goat is kept in a new earthen pitcher overnight. If this particular pitcher is held on the lap by a childless woman, she would be blessed with child. The husband of the woman carrying the Loue pitcher must perform a purificatory ceremony along with his wife. In the morning they are to proceed to the tank for arranging bath of the Loue pitcher through a short ceremony.
3. The swinging ceremony of the Bhaktyas with their bodies hanging on specially prepared hooks. It takes place generally on the last day of the Gajan festival of Dharmaraj and it is the essential feature of the said festival. The swinging tree which is made of wood is implanted vertically in an open plain at the vicinity of the temple. The top of the vertical pole is provided with a strong pivot to which a large cross beam is fixed. The cross beam revolves round the vertical pole. The Bhaktyas pierce their back by iron hooks with the help of the village blacksmith and hang their bodies one after another to whirl round the vertical pole. By means of a long rope tied on the other side of the cross beam the whole thing is put in a whirling motion.

At present this practice of swinging by piercing hooks at the back has been stopped in consequence of a legislation imposed by the government. The Bhaktiyas now-a-days tie up their bodies to the cross beam with the help of ropes or napkins instead of piercing the bodies with hooks. But in Metela village this primitive system of hook-swinging is not only present in full swing but it is highly characterized by various glorified as well as fierce activities.

4. Playing of the Bhaktiyas with *hanria* or rice-beer placed in small *bhanr* or earthen pots. The Bhaktiyas observe fast for the day and ask for blessings from the deity. After this they take new earthen pots and proceed in a procession to the prearranged village liquor booth to take potful of *hanria* by observing a short ceremony there. On their coming back to the shrine of the deity they are possessed one after another, and begin to dance in a wild manner. This is known by the term *bhanral khela*. It is the characteristic feature of the worship of Dharmaraj in Birbhum.
5. The folk literature in the form of narrative poetry depicting the nature and activities of the different indigenous deities. These *mangal kavyas* have been composed by a large number of poets whose activities conspicuously flourished during the medieval period. The intention of the works is to pin-point the origin, development and spread of the local deities and to evaluate their influence on the life of the people. These works have got immense sociological importance as these explain systematically the trend of sanskritization of the indigenous deities.
6. The folk literature based on the narration of glorified life activities of Dharmaraj. It developed during the medieval period. The earliest composer of this *kavya* is Ramai Pandit who has written his famous episode on Lausen not before the fifth century A.D. There are large number of legends which depict the different background of Dharma worship. The other principal composers are Adi Rupram, Khelaram, Manikram, Ghanaram, Shyam Pandit, Sitaram, etc. .
7. At the southern bank of the river Ajay there is an elevated land. It was ruled over by the Sena kings and it afterwards was designated as Senpahari. There was a fort at the highest point of Senpahari. In the midst of thick forest the ruins of the ancient fort are still visible. The fort in question was known as Trisasthigarh. Ichai Ghosh changed its name and called Dhekur, which, in due course, became known as Shyamarupargarh. When it was known as Dhekur, a large tract of land at the bank of Ajay was identified as Dhekkari. At about 16 km north to this place there is a village named Jashpur which possesses the god Siva known as Dhekureswar Siva, and at the vicinity of which there is a tank known as Dhekurey. Probably Trisasthigarh was the capital of Sumbhadesh. It is said that Ichai Ghosh established the goddess Shyamarupa. Some scholars are of opinion that Shyamarupa is the corrupted form of Sumbharupa.
8. The land of the Gopas or Goalas/milkmen caste. Ichai Ghosh—the

celebrated propitiator of the goddess Bhawani—was a Goala or Gope by caste. He was a courageous and freedom loving man. All sorts of obstacles used to be washed away by his strong personality. He readily became a towering personality throughout the region extending at the southern bank of the Ajay and with the help of his fellow castemen he established a new residential and administrative unit known as *Gopabhum*.

9. The celebrated tank bearing the memory of Lausen who was the Commander-in-Chief of the Army of the King of Gauda. He declared war against Ichai Ghosh. The actual place where the army were encamped is known as *Lausen talao*. It is situated at the northern bank of the river Ajay, six or seven km east of Jaydev-Kenduli. At the neighbouring region there is a well known as *Lausen Kunda* and a part of tank which is popularly called as Hantugari. The Doms of the locality arrange worship of Kalubir in a gorgeous manner. Kalubir was the Chief of the Army staff of Lausen and he was Dom by caste.
10. God of the celestial world. Narada is the son of Saraswati. He is a gifted speaker and musician. His sense of humour is characterized by deep-rooted intellectual activities and most of the time it led him to provoke many quarrels among gods and goddesses.
11. The folk literature depicting the divine grace of the goddess Chandi. Like all other *mangal kavyas* the Chandimangal developed during the medieval period in the soil of Bengal. The different stories that describe the glory of the goddess in question are composed of numerous events in the life of man on earth. These attract the attention of the common people and enhance the regard mixed with awe for the deity. There were many poets who composed various ballads in this connection, of whom the names of Manik Datta, Dwija Madhab, Mukundram, Dwija Ramdeva, Muktaram Sen, Hariram and Bharat Chandra Roy are worth-mentioning.
12. A form of the goddess Durga. The goddess sitting on a lotus and engaged in swallowing and eructing an elephant was described as the goddess Kamale Kamini by Kavikankan Mukundaram. She appeared over the water level of Kalidaha. Practically it is a kind of sea-mirage which is caused by unevenly heated air layers bending light rays resulting in the crew to see objects situated at a very large distance and which normally becomes out of sight. While sailing over the vast ocean the crew often finds the images of houses, animals, ships over the broad horizon, some of these are seen upside down. All these scenes are the direct result of actions and interactions of heated air and light.
13. During the medieval period in Bengal a rich folk literature developed centering round the snake goddess Manasa. As early as the thirteenth or fourteenth century A.D. about one hundred authors came forward to write down the popular legend of Chand. Amongst them Vijoy Gupta, Hari Datta, Narayan Deva, Vamsidas, etc., are

notable. These narratives depict the origin and development of Manasa cult in the different parts of the country. It shows the actual trend how the goddess was recognised at last by the higher section of the society.

14. The pitcher-image of Manasa. These pitchers are made of clay with one or more models of hooded snakes at the top of these. These pitcher-images are placed on the altar and worship is performed. Sometimes housewives establish *manasa-ghat* after pouring water in a new earthen pitcher and placing a twig of *manasa* plant, *Cactus indicus*. It is ceremonially worshipped as the goddess Manasa.
15. The legend of *asthanag* or eight snakes is very popular in the serpent lore throughout the country. The tradition of worship of eight snakes is prevalent among the orthodox Hindus in India. It has the origin which is rooted to the cultural matrix of the higher sections of the Hindus. The cult of *asthanag* has developed a uniform character throughout the length and breadth of India specially which is related to the Hindu religious pantheon. But this cult has nothing to do with the society and culture of the rural people. The chief of the serpents is known by the term Vasuki, one of the *asthanag*.
16. The fifth day of the bright half of the month of Sravana (July-August).
17. The tenth day of the bright half of the month of Asadh (June-July). It is the day on which the river Ganga is ceremonially worshipped by the Hindus.
18. Abstinence from cooking. This ceremony is observed on the occasion of Manasa worship on the last day of Bhadra (August-September). The ovens are not kindled on this day and, therefore, no meals are prepared. People take food that has been prepared on the day before. The housewives clean the ovens with cow-dung paste and draw *alpna* with rice-paste. A twig of *si* plant is placed inside the oven where the worships of eight serpents and Manasa—the serpent goddess—are performed.
19. These Puranas depict the goddess Kali's association with Aryan culture. There are a number of stories in these religious texts which individually pin-point the deity's close connection with the higher Hindu tradition. In these texts there is an inclination to provide authentic materials for the identification of goddess Kali in the background of the Brahminic gods and goddesses.

The oral traditional literature based on the indigenous analysis of the goddess Kali. It narrates different stories depicting the power of the goddess to help her worshipper and also to crush her opponents. Kalikamangal was composed by various poets during the medieval period when a large scale clash was regularly felt between Hinduized and non-Hindu deities. The eminent poets who composed the different phases of the Kalikamangal are Kanka, Sridhar, Sabirid Khan, Govinda Das, Krishnaram, Pranaram, Ramprasad and Bharat Chandra.

Concerned Villages and Associated Shrines

I

THE village deities just described in the previous chapter have shrines of different nature in the villages of the region under study. In order to study the socio-cultural perspective of the people through the pattern of propitiation of the village deities, ten villages scattered over the region under study have been taken up. In these villages the deities in question are worshipped with pomp and eclat. The participation of the different sections of people gives the different festivals, connected with the worship, an integrated pattern. These villages are Tantipara, Metela, Ekabbarpur, Khairadihi, Tentulbandh, Bhanra, Lakshindarpur, Lauberia, Joydev-Kenduli, and Shibpur. Table 4.1,

**TABLE 4.1 : Name of the Village, Anchal, Police Station
and District**

Name of the village	Anchal	Police Station	District
1. Tantipara	Rajnagar	Rajnagar	Birbhum
2. Metela	Gohaliara	Dubrajpur	"
3. Ekabbarpur	"	"	"
4. Khairadihi	Rajnagar	Rajnagar	"
5. Tentulbandh	Rajnagar	Rajnagar	"
6. Bhanra	Gohaliara	Dubrajpur	"
7. Lakshindarpur	Koridhya	Suri	"
8. Lauberia	Nacakonda	Khayrasole	"
9. Joydev-Kenduli	Illumbazar	Illumbazar	"
10. Shibpur	Bidbihar	Kanksa	Burdwan

Figs. 4.1 and 4.2 would provide information regarding Anchals, Police Stations and Districts in which these villages are situated.

Tantipara village is situated at the north-western corner of Bakreswar—the famous religious centre of the region. This village is in the jurisdiction of Rajnagar Police Station of the Sadar Sub-division of Birbhum district. Tantipara is directly connected with Suri in the east and Dubrajpur in the south-west by direct metalled road. This village is bounded by Adanpur, Laujore and Padampur villages in the north, Bakreswar and Lakshmipur in the south, Chandrapur in the east and Parulia and Khairadihi in the west. Tantipara is a very big as well as well-developed village in the region. According to 1971 Census the total population of the village is 3,958. This village is inhabited by 17 different castes like Brahmin, Tantubaya/weaver, Moyra/confectioner, Goala/milkman, Kamar/blacksmith, Benia/trader, Sutradhar/carpenter, Poddar, Kolu/oilman, Malakar/florist, Swarnakar/goldsmith, Vaishnav, Rajput, Jele/fisherman, Bagdi, Bauri, Dom. There is one tribal community—the Santal, who live at the outskirts of the village. The Tentubaya is the dominant caste of this village and they are distributed in about 800 households. In colloquial term the Tantubaya is known as “Tanti” and from this particular community the village owes its name—*Tantipara*, i.e., the ward of the weavers. There is one health centre in this village. It has one Post Office and two high schools, one for the boys and the other for the girls. From time immemorial Tantipara has been an important centre for *tussar* industry. The community of the weavers is still maintaining that skilful tradition. At present all the weavers’ families possess their own weaving equipments by which they weave high grades of *tussar* clothes. Recently these clothes have created great demand in the foreign markets like England, U.S.A., Japan, etc.

The village is divided into four wards like—(1) Hat-tala, (2) Dhanyakuna, (3) Nij Tantipara and (4) Chandinagar. There are two Dharmaraj shrines in this village. One is found in the northern side of the ward Hat-tala and the other is established at Dhanyakuna ward. These two shrines are brick-built temples. In the vicinity of the Dharmaraj temple at Hat-tala there is one Siva temple which is also brick-built. There are two Manasa

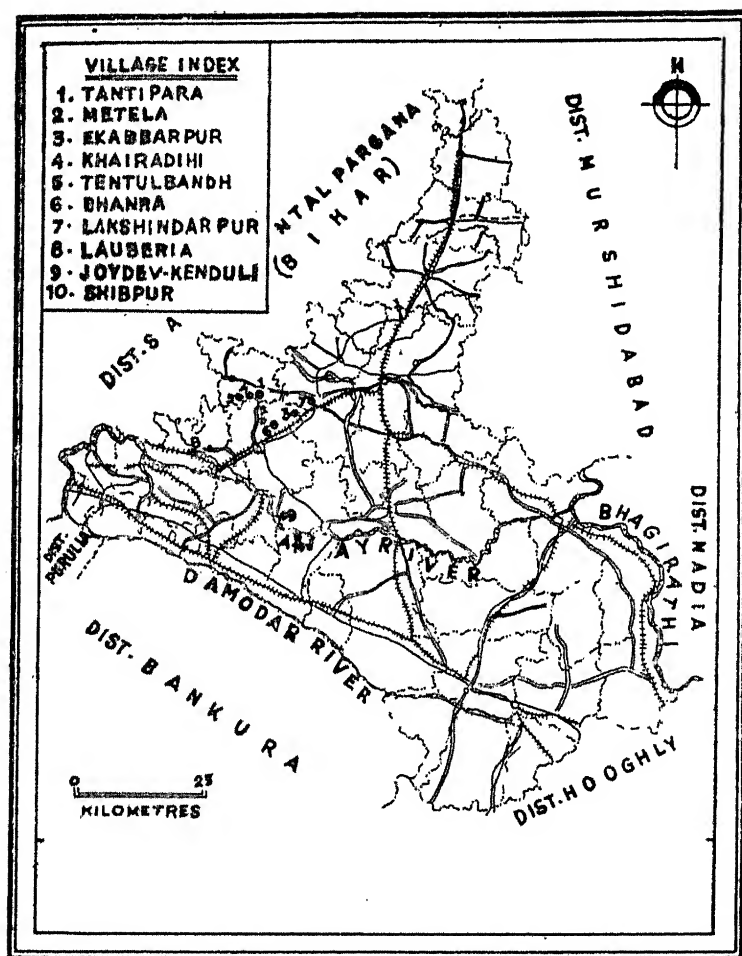


FIG. 4.1 : Map of Birbhum and Burdwan Districts showing the Location of Villages studied

deities in this village. One is found by the side of the Dharmaraj at Hat-tala and the other found at the house of one fisherman family. Besides these, worship of Durga, Kali, Jagatdhatri and Siva is held in this village. But the grandeur of the festival connected with Dharmaraj surpasses all.

The villagers mostly follow their caste profession. A few Tantubaya young men have received higher education and they are in service at urban centres. But some of them still cling to their traditional profession; of course, in a new style and pattern. The Brahmins are traditional priestly community. But the younger generations are in different occupations, mostly service. Some of them are engaged in teaching profession. The establishment of one Girls' High School has caused a great deal in the spread of education among the girls of the village and other neighbouring locality.

The main economy of the village is based on agriculture and weaving industry. The large weekly market is held at Hat-tala which plays the most important role in the sale and purchase of the local merchandises. The different castes of the village are ranked according to the traditional system and it is maintained specially during the socio-ritual ceremonies done on village level. Seventeen castes of the village Tantipara are arranged as follows according to the hierarchical order:

Brahmin		
Rajput	Vaishnav	Santal
Tantubaya/weaver	Goala/milkman	Moyra/confectioner
Benia/trader	Swarnakar/goldsmith	Karmakar/blacksmith
		Malakar/florist
Poddar	Kolu/oilman	
Sutradhar/carpenter	Jele/fisherman	
Bagdi		
Bauri	Dom	

The village Metela is located at the southern corner of Bakreswar and it is at the opposite of Tantipara village. Metela village is in the jurisdiction of Dubrajpur Police Station of Sadar Sub-division of Birbhum district. Suri-Dubrajpur road touches this village and its distance from Dubrajpur is 9 km. Metela is a large-sized village and is composed of five distinct

wards,—(1) Metela proper, (2) Matijapur, (3) Murgatala, (4) Govindapur and (5) Bosekanda. The village Metela is encircled by Bakreswar, and Palasban villages in the north, Gundaba and Banhari villages in the south. On the western side there are Ghat Gopalpur and Rampur villages and Gopalpur village is seen on the eastern side. This village is inhabited by 2,743 people belonging to 13 castes and two tribal communities. These are like the following: Brahmin, Grahacharya, Goala/milkman, Sadgop, Vaishnav, Moyra/confectioner, Karmakar/blacksmith, Sutradhar/carpenter, Mal, Bagdi, Dom, Bauri and Muchi. The three tribal communities are Kora, Pahari and Santal. As regards numerical strength and the economic position, the Goalas occupy a conspicuous position. The Brahmins come next to them. The Sadgop caste is engaged in agriculture and largely controls the agricultural economy. The village has a Post-Office and one Primary School. The village liquor booth is situated at the western corner. The villagers keep a close link with Dubrajpur—the nearest town—for higher education and other necessary allied affairs. The younger educated section of the villagers are service holders, a small percentage of them are engaged in organising business.

The shrine of Dharmaraj is situated in the central part of the village. There is a brick-built temple of Dharmaraj. By the side of the altar of Dharmaraj there is a seat for Manasa. In front of the temple there is one *Natmandir*¹ where various performances take place. At the eastern side of the *Natmandir* a brick-built altar is found which is known as the seat for Kala Bhairab. The shrine of Chandi is situated at Bauripara. By the side of the village road leading to the interior of the Bauripara there is one mud-built altar where the shrine of Chandi is situated. An altar for the deity known as *Mahadana* is found by the side of the shrine of Chandi. These three deities—Dharmaraj, Manasa and Chandi—are regarded as the all-village deities. There are other folk deities whose worship is either done on community level or family level. The worship of Palashi² is conducted by the Mal caste, the Grahacharyas³ organise the worship of Manasa. At the entrance of the village from the metalled road side there is one mud-built altar where the worship of Bandha Kali takes place. The annual worship at this shrine takes place on the first day of the Bengali month Magh

(February-March). At the time of drought the villagers arrange special worship when 108 pots of water are poured on the head of the deity for having rain. Besides these, there are two brick-built Vishnu temples and one Durga temple in this village. This village is specially characterized by the pomp and eclat in the worship of Dharmaraj. The propitiation of Chandi also brings forth many peculiar features which attract large number of people from the distant places.

The economy of this village is purely based on agriculture and its allied activities. The hierarchical order of the castes in this village can be arranged in the following way. The villagers still cling to the traditional caste ranking and during socio-religious activities it is strictly observed.

Brahmin	
Grahacharya	
Vaishnav Sadgop Moyra/confectioner Goala/milkman	
Karmakar/blacksmith	
Sutradhar/carpenter	
Kora/Santal/Pahari	
Mal	Bagdi
Bauri	Dom
Muchi	

Ekabbarpur village is situated on the eastern side of Bakreswar. It is a small village inhabited by 612 persons. Ekabbarpur is under the Police Station of Dubrajpur in Birbhum district. It is situated at about 4 km from Suri-Dubrajpur metalled road. One kutcha road connects the village and the metalled road. But during the rainy months it becomes troublesome. There is one main road in the village and the houses are arranged on the both sides of the road. Ekabbarpur is surrounded by Krishnapur in the north, Metala and Jhanpartala in the south, Palashbuni and Rajganj villages are to be seen on the east and Gohaliara village is situated at the western side. This village is peopled by 5 castes and 1 tribal community. Mahisya, Karmakar, Bagdi, Bauri and Dom are the caste-groups. Besides these, there is a Santal community living on the outskirts of the village. There are altogether 44 households. The Mahisyas are the predominant caste and they hold all the agricultural lands. The economy of the village is naturally

centralized in the hands of these people. This village has got no school and Post Office and for these the villagers of Ekabbarpur are to depend on other villages. Almost all the people follow the traditional caste occupation.

The shrine of Dharmaraj is situated in the central part of the village. Inside the mud-built temple there is an elevated altar which is also made of mud. Dharmaraj is seen to be placed on this altar along with other deities like Siva and Charak Thakur. There is a *natmandir* in front of the temple where people assemble during festive occasions. It also acts as a central meeting platform of the villagers.

The village economy rotates round agriculture and its allied activities. The castes and tribe inhabiting in the village can be arranged like following as per hierarchical order:

Mahisya

Santal

Karmakar

Bagdi

Bauri

Dom

Khairadihi village is situated at the northern side of Bakreswar and its distance is 5 km from Bakreswar. This village is under the jurisdiction of Rajnagar Police Station of Birbhum district. Khairadihi is accessible by a morrum road originating from the Suri-Dubrajpur metalled road in between Bakreswar and Tantipara. This road runs direct to the Santal Parganas district of Bihar finding its way through Khairadihi village. It is a medium-sized village and is inhabited by 720 persons who belong to thirteen castes and Muslim community. These thirteen castes are Tantubaya/weaver, Kumbhakar/potter, Sutradhar/carpenter, Goala/milkman, Karmakar/blacksmith, Napit, Moyra/confectioner, Kolu/oilman, Sunri, Vaishnav, Bagdi, Bauri and Dom. The villagers are mainly engaged in cultivation and allied works. The Tantubaya families possess looms and they weave different types of *tusser* clothes characteristic of this locality. There is one Primary School in this village. The villagers depend on Tantipara weekly market for serving their requirements. The Muslim ward is located at the southern part of the village. The morrum road separates Hindu ward

from the Muslims. Amongst the Muslims there are a few well-to-do landholders.

Khairadihi village is famous in this region for the shrine of Mangalchandi. The goddess Mangalchandi resides in a mud-built temple and in front of which there is a well-built *nat-mandir*. Within the boundary of the shrine of the goddess there are—one *bhogmandir*, i.e., where *prasad* is prepared, one *ashram* for the *sannyasis*, one masonry well. All are encircled by a boundary wall. At the south end of the village there is a seat for indigenous village deity—the Gaila Buri.⁴ The *than* of Gaila Buri is situated within a mango grove. Beside these deities, the villagers propitiate the goddess Kali annually. The Muslim inhabitants of the village have got their *pir* and *dargas* within their locality.

The villagers mainly cling to their traditional callings except in a few cases. Five Tantubaya gentlemen have taken up teaching professions in this locality. The thirteen different castes of the village can be arranged according to their hierarchical position.

Vaishnav

Tantubaya/weaver Goala/milkman Moyra/confectioner

Napit/barbar

Karmakar/blacksmith Kumbhakar/potter Muslim

Kolu/oilman

Sunri/distiller

Sutradhar/carpenter

Bagdi

Bauri Dom

Tentulbandh village, situated at the western side of Khairadihi village, is very small in size and is inhabited by 246 persons. This village is under the administrative boundary of Rajnagar Police Station of Birbhum district. The morrum road mentioned above goes by the side of this village. Tentulbandh is bounded by Gaisara village in the east, Parasia village in the west and in the south Muktipur village is situated. The northern part of the village is encircled by the forest. There are three castes in this village, viz., Sadgop, Bagdi and Dom. This village does not have a Post Office, school or any other public institution. The inhabitants mainly depend on agriculture and other

related activities. The villagers are to depend on the neighbouring village for their day-to-day requirements. The Sadgops are the predominant caste and they are good cultivators. Most of the village lands are in their possession.

The shrine of Dharmaraj is situated at the south-western end of the village just by the side of the morrum road. The temple of Dharmaraj is a brick-built one. By the side of the temple there are two earthen mounds in which the terracotta horses dedicated to Dharmaraj are buried.

The village economy is centred round agricultural activities. The hierarchical picture of the three castes of the village is like the following:

Sadgop
Bagdi
Dom

Bhanra village is located about 4 km south-east of Metela village. A kutch road extends from Metela to Bhanra which is situated by the side of Bakreswar rivulet. Bhanra is a small village and it is bounded by Rajganj village in the north, Bandarsol and Gopalpur villages in the south, Radhamadhabpur and Chinpal villages in the east, and Bakreswar and Jhanpartala villages in the west. Bhanra is under the jurisdiction of Dubrajpur Police Station of Birbhum district. The village is inhabited by 370 persons and they belong to four different castes and one tribal community (the Santals). These castes are Sadgop, Sunri/distiller, Bagdi and Bauri. There are altogether 36 households. The Santals live on the eastern sector of the village. There are only two Sunri/distiller families, who possess most of the village agricultural lands. Bhanra does not have a school, Post-Office or any other public institution. It is mainly populated by the lower caste people.

The shrine of Manasa is situated at the Bagdipara. Inside a mud-built hut there is a small earthen altar on which the Manasa *ghots* are placed. By the side there is another room in which the goddess Kali is found. Inside Bauripara there is a shrine of Chandi. On the earthen altar some engraved images of Chandi are found. This altar is found at the foot of a *pipal* tree.

Most of the inhabitants of the village follow the traditional

caste-based occupations. The castes of the village can be arranged according to the following way so far as their hierarchical positions are concerned:

Sadgop

Santal

Sunri

Bagdi

Bauri

Lakshindarpur is also a very small village situated near Suri—the district headquarters. It is about 5 km south-west of Suri. Lakshindarpur is within the jurisdiction of Suri Police Station and is inhabited by Sadgop, Bagdi, Bauri and Dom castes. There are altogether 39 households with a population of 77 males and 83 females. One can go from Suri to this village by a metalled road (Suri-Rajnagar Road) up to Koridhya village and then a kutchra road is emerged at the extreme end of the latter village leading to Lakshindarpur. There is one Sadgop family in this village which dominates over the other caste-groups. There is a tendency to follow the traditional caste occupation in this village. The village does not have a school, Post Office or any other institutions. For all their daily requirements the villagers of Lakshindarpur depend on the nearest developed village—Koridhya.

At the southern end of the village there is a shrine of Dharmaraj. There is no temple or any kind of structure is to be met here. The shrine is situated at the foot of a mango tree. Some pieces of stones smeared with vermilion attract the attention of the passersby.

The economic condition of the village is very poor. Only three families cultivate in their own lands and rest of the persons are agricultural labourers. The castes of the village are arranged in the following way according to their traditional hierarchy:

Sadgop

Bagdi

Bauri

Dom

Shibpur village is situated 3 km south of Joydev-Kenduli. It is under Kanksa Police Station in the district of Burdwan.

Shibpur is a medium-sized village and is bounded by Nabagram and Krishnapur villages in the north, Jatgareh village in the south, Gaurangapur village in the east and Phuljhor village in the west. Displaced persons from the then East Pakistan have taken their permanent shelter in the eastern sector of the village. There are altogether 173 households with a population of 373 males and 348 females. The castes in this village belong to the following categories—Brahmin, Kayastha, Sadgop, Tambuli, Ahir Goala/milkman, Sutradhar, Bagdi, Lohar, and Muchi. There is one tribal community—the Santal—who live at the southern corner of the village. The displaced persons belong to the Namasudra section but they do not exert any influence in the overall caste society of the village. A developed morrum road extends from Shibpur to Muchipara on the Grand Trunk Road near Durgapur—the steel city. At about one kilometre south of Shibpur village another road is diverted to Ukhra—the centre of coal mine complex. The principal economy of the village is cultivation. The Brahmin and Kayastha families occupy most of the village lands. There are 9 public buses which ply between Shibpur and Burdwan, or Durgapur and Asansol. These buses terminate at Shibpur and naturally a small business complex has developed there and a good number of villagers have engaged themselves in the different kinds of business. The village has one Junior High School, a Post Office and a Health Centre. A small section of the villagers are service holders in the steel city of Durgapur or at the centre of coal industry of Ukhra.

The village is divided into two wards—eastern and western. The shrine of Mahadana is situated on the embankment of a tank in the midst of paddy field at a little distance from the western ward of the village. The small altar of the deity is made of brick. At the side of it there is a seat for the Brahmachari. The western ward of the village possesses a shrine for the goddess Kali, the worship of whom is organized by the lower section of the people. The temple of the goddess is mud-built and it is thatched with corrugated iron sheets. In front of the temple of Kali there is a small brick-built altar for Bhairab. Besides these, there are Durga temple, Vishnu temple and Shiva temple in this village whose worships are also done on village level.

* The different castes of the village are arranged as per hierarchical position in the following way:

Brahmin		Santal
Kayastha	Sadgop	
Ahir Goala/milkman		
Tambuli		
Sutradhar		
Bagdi	Lohar	
Muchi		

II

The shrines of Dharmaraj, Chandi, Manasa, Mahadana and Kali—the deities to be analysed for understanding the way of life and behaviour pattern of the rural folk—are seen to develop in these villages just described (Fig. 4.3). In course of time the life of the people have become intermingled with these deities. These deities have their own legends that pass from generation to generation. Their special love and sympathy for the villagers in which they reside found place in the folklore and ballads which the people recite off and on. Similarly, some of these deities were enraged at their neglect. The way in which they took revenge is mentioned with awe by the rural folk from the memory of past events. All beliefs, superstitions and folk-tales that have developed round these village deities are characterized by indigenous view points and popular psychology of the region. The beliefs and attitudes developed in the background of these deities focus the mental set-up of the sons of the soil. It would be very much relevant to find out this belief-attitude pattern centering round the emergence, development and nature of so-called activities of the deities according to the villages in which they reside. The shrines of the village deities exert multiple influence in the life of the villagers. During worship of the deities these become centres of recreation and showing reverence to the gods and goddesses. But at other times these shrines very often turn to be common meeting place for various discussions on different problems of life. Sometimes these become the rest place to pass a few idle hours. In a Thai village, Potter has seen that the temple is the social, political and recreational centre of village life. Villagers come to the temple compound to read the newspaper and to gossip (1976: 36).

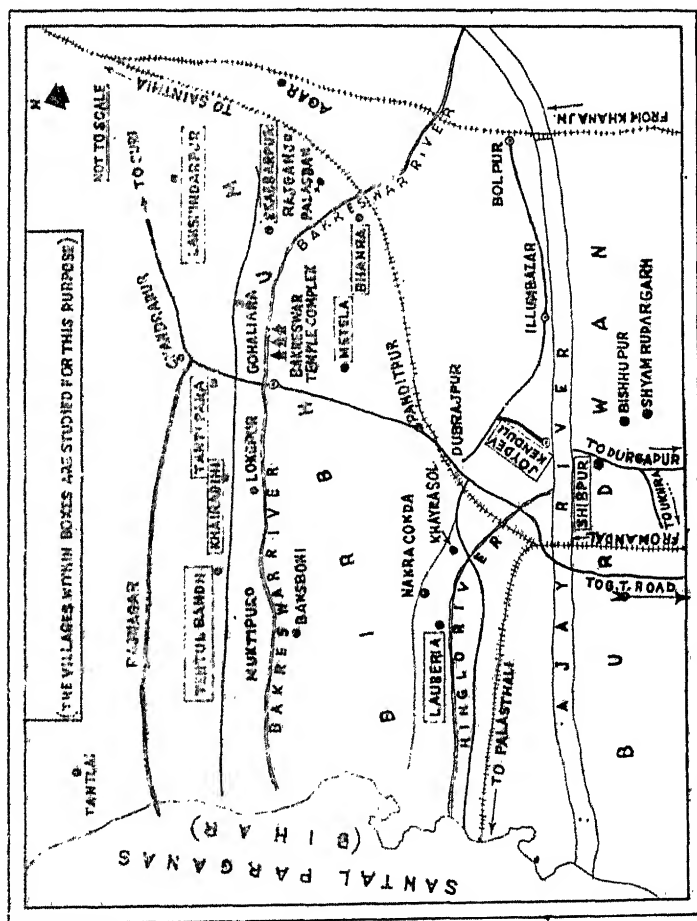


FIG. 4.2: Map showing the Region of Study (the Villages within Boxes are Studied for this purpose)

Shrines of Dharmaraj

There are two different shrines of Dharmaraj in Tantipara village. Both the shrines are well-built temples and these exert considerable influence over the life and activities of the people of the village. In this village Dharmaraj is regarded by all as the tutelary deity. During all kinds of stress villagers approach Dharmaraj as their saviour and this tradition is still continuing. Dharmaraj of Hat-tala is the older one in comparison to the same deity at Dhanyakuna. In the temple of Dharmaraj at Hat-tala there is a brick-built altar on which a modern throne is placed. There are three black coloured stone slabs of small size. In the midst of these stone slabs there is a small box made of gold. Inside the box one small and rounded piece of transparent stone like object is seen. It is said that this piece of stone is the real Dharmaraj. The stone slabs representing Dharmaraj are smaller in size. It is very difficult to find out the origin of the worship of Dharmaraj here. The local people strongly believe in the active influence of the deity. Some say that Dharmaraj of both the temples come out at dead hours of night on the back of white horse. They roam about on the different village paths and then visit the shrine of Giri Dharam in the western part of the village. Giri Dharam was an ascetic long time back, who used to engage in deep meditation under a tree and in course of time this particular site became a sacred spot. Some people report that they still hear the sound of horses stepping in the late hours of night when it is quiet.

Dharmaraj of Tantipara is known as *Dharma baba*. Dharmaraj is found in association with some other deities. On the right and left side of the throne of Dharmaraj there are two stone images representing Manasa. Their bodies are ornamented with snakes made of stone. At the southern corner of the temple of Dharmaraj of Hat-tala there are two temples—one for Bhairabnath and the other for Siva. In the temple of Dharmaraj of Dhanyakuna also there is one Manasa deity. Both the Dharmaraj are worshipped by Brahmin priests. Mahina Roy of Parasia village is the traditional priest of Dharmaraj of Hat-tala. During festive occasions the priest from the Mukherjee families of Tantipara village participate. The Acharya families of Tantipara are engaged in the daily and

annual special worship of Dharmaraj at Dhanyakuna. There are no *Deyashis* of Dharmaraj of this village.

The annual worship is held on the full-moon day of the month of *Vaishakh* (April-May). On the eve of the annual worship of Dharmaraj a large scale performance is organised in which various shrines of local folk deities are visited and ceremonial invitations are given to these deities for attending the worship of Dharmaraj at Tantipara. There is a Manasa deity in the house of the fisherman who is ceremonially carried to Dharmaraj temple. The organisers of Dharmaraj worship of Dhanyakuna visit the neighbouring village named Lokepur ceremonially and from a jungle region they take a clay horse and carry it to Dharmaraj shrine of their own village. In the midst of paddy field there is one Dharmaraj known by the name *Adirey Dharam*, who is also ceremonially invited by the organisers. The worship of Dharmaraj is conducted in the name of the villagers as a whole in both the shrines. The shrines are regarded as the common property of the village.

Dharmaraj shrine of Metela village is worth mentioning as it is characterized by many peculiar events during annual festival. Dharmaraj is situated on a wooden throne which is placed over a brick-built altar. The temple is south-faced and is made of brick. In front of the temple there is a *natmandir* and by the side of which there is an altar for Bhairab. There are large number of burnt clay and wooden horses on the altar. Dharmaraj is represented by a black stone slab and is known as *Baro Raj*. It is said that the worship of Dharmaraj is more than 600 years old. According to the older generations of the village, Dharmaraj was brought from a neighbouring village in the remote past and the worship is undertaken by the then villagers. As a proof to this sort of apprehension the villagers mention the system of ceremonial bringing of one clay horse as a representative of Dharmaraj from a forested region at the eastern end of Metela village. In the open field there is an altar where many vermilion painted broken clay horses indicate the seat for the deity. On the previous day of worship a new clay horse is taken to this spot and after some formal propitiations the *Mul Deyashi*⁵ carries the clay horse on his shoulder to the temple at Metela. He is accompanied by a large procession formed by the villagers, the drummers and the *Deyashis*.

Dharmaraj is regarded by the villagers as the chief deity and all of them, irrespective of classes and castes, have deep faith in his different activities related with him. The villagers believe that Dharmaraj keeps a constant watch over them and at dead hours of night he wanders over the village paths riding on a white horse. Dharmaraj of this village is closely connected with two indigenous village deities during the various phases of worship of the former. Inside the temple of Dharmaraj there is a seat for Manasa where a wooden horse is kept as the representative of Manasa who lives in a distant village named Agar. The seat of Bagh Roy⁶ is found at the eastern corner of the village. This deity, exclusively worshipped by the lower caste people, has a special role in the festival of Dharmaraj. Bagh Roy is represented by a number of small stone slabs placed on a mud-built altar under a mango tree.

Dharmaraj of Metela is considerably influenced by the Brahminic thoughts and ideas. There are large number of Brahminical rituals which are followed during the annual *puja* festival which is held on the full-moon day in the month of *Vaishakh* (April-May). The shrine of this deity is specially characterized by the observance of *charak* which is conducted through different kinds of bodily tortures, and *jiv ban*⁷ or piercing of the tongue by iron rods followed by a dance. The *charak* is held on a robust *sal* pole about 60 feet in height and 3 feet in diameter at the lower end. It is known as *charak* tree. To the villagers this *charak* tree is a living embodiment of Dharmaraj. The *charak* tree is kept immersed in the water of a pond named Nayabandh not far from the shrine of Dharmaraj.

Dharmaraj is worshipped by the Brahmin priest of the village. At present Sri Saranon Roy is the chief priest of the deity. His post is hereditary. Daily worship of Dharmaraj is performed in a purely Brahminical way and through the Vedic procedures. But during the annual festivals a large number of non-Brahminical performances are seen to be intermingled giving the annual festival a complicated picture of sanskritic and non-sanskritic ideas.

The Goala caste seems to be the original inhabitant of the village and, it is most probable, that these people were the first organisers of the worship of Dharmaraj. In the annual festival or Gajan of Dharmaraj the male members of the Goalas/milkmen

are *Bala Bhaktiyas*.⁸ The *Bala Bhaktiyas* are regarded as the deity's close associates. It is customary for the Goala families of the village to pay Rs. 5 in cash to the fund of Dharmaraj during the marriage and *sraadh* ceremonies.

Ekabbarpur village has the shrine of Dharmaraj in the middle of the village. The deity is placed on an earthen altar and the temple is built with mud. It is thatched by corrugated iron sheets. The temple is south-facing and there is a *natmandir* in front of it. A black stone slab is represented as Dharmaraj. According to the villagers, about one hundred and fifty years ago there was a small golden idol inside a box made of brass. But one night it had been stolen by the thief. Then the stone slab representing Dharmaraj was ceremonially placed on the altar. Dharmaraj is the chief deity of the village and villagers believe that during the late hours of the night when everything has become calm and quiet Dharmaraj himself rides on a horseback, white in colour, and moves through the main road of the village. Sometimes he goes to visit the Dharma shrine of the neighbouring village named Jamthali. At that very auspicious moment the wind blows fast and a jingling noise is heard. At the shrine Dharmaraj is associated with Siva, who is also represented by a black stone slab of small size. There is another deity who is known as *Charak Thakur* represented by an image of same size and of same material.

Dharmaraj is worshipped by a Brahmin priest belonging to the priestly community of Bakreswar village. He follows purely Brahminical procedures in the worship of Dharmaraj. The priest enjoys the yield from nine *bighas* of cultivable lands allotted to him for the maintenance of the daily worship of the deity. The annual worship is held on the full-moon day in the month of *Vaishakh* (April-May). Sri Bhakti Mondal, Mahishya by caste, takes the responsibility of holding annual festival. He collects donations and subscriptions from the villagers and arranges for the smooth performance of the different items of the annual festival.

Dharmaraj of Tetulbandh village is situated in a very old brick-built temple. Inside the temple there is a brick altar. The deity is represented by a glazed metallic object kept inside a box made of brass. The villagers refer the name of Dharmaraj in all their day-to-day affairs. They believe that Dharmaraj

stays side by side with them. Many people have reported that when any danger approaches the villagers, Dharmaraj himself protects them from it. He also keeps a constant watch over the village and the villagers during day and night. It is reported that Dharmaraj takes the form of a prince riding on a horseback and roams about every night in the neighbouring villages and the jungles. If anybody happens to meet him roaming about at the dead hours of night, the person concerned must bow down to him from distance and should go away from his path, otherwise the person concerned may face severe consequence. Every villager follows this direction and controls his movement. Dharmaraj is the solitary deity in this shrine. There are a large number of clay horses which are offered to the deity. The temple is also a solitary structure standing in the open field.

Dharmaraj of this village is worshipped by the Roy family (Brahmin) of the neighbouring village named Parasia. He takes all the responsibility for holding the daily worship and annual festivals of Dharmaraj. As his remuneration, he enjoys five *bighas* of cultivable lands. In addition to this the villagers contribute, according to their means, at the time of annual festival of Dharmaraj held on the full-moon day of the month of *Vaishakh* (April-May).

At Lakshindarpur the shrine of Dharmaraj is found at the foot of a tamarind tree. A tortoise shaped stone slab is identified as Dharmaraj. There are remnants of brick-built temple of the deity in the midst of the tamarind and mango trees at the site. There are numerous vermilion smeared clay horses at the shrine. Just beside Dharmaraj there is a seat for Brahmadaittya.⁹ The Roy family of Nagari village was the original inhabitant of the village in question. But, in course of time, the family member had shifted to Nagari village. Dharmaraj of Lakshindarpur is famous throughout the locality for the cure of all kinds of bone fracture and the disease of the bone. The *Deyashi* of Dharmaraj belongs to Sadgop caste. He is closely attached to the deity regarding the treatment of bone and its fractures. The village itself is very insignificant, the shrine of Dharmaraj also does not possess any grandeur; but his influence is spread over the length and breadth of the region.

Dharmaraj of the village is worshipped by a Brahmin of a

neighbouring village, named Chora. The annual worship is held on the full-moon day of the month of *Vaishakh* (April-May).

Shrines of Chandi

Of the ten villages studied, four possess the shrines of Chandi. Chandi deity of Metela village is famous throughout the region. It is the household deity of the Bauri community. In the eastern part of the village called Bauripara, the shrine of Chandi is seen here under a *pipal* tree. At the foot of the tree there is a raised platform on which three different kinds of Chandi are placed. They are known as *Mangal Chandi*, *Marak Chandi* and *Khyapa Ma*. All of them are represented by smaller stone slabs painted with vermilion mixed with oil. These deities are worshipped by the Bauri *Deyashi*. No Brahmin is engaged for the propitiation of the deity. The shrine of Chandi is in possession of the Bauri *Deyashi*. He officiates at the post traditionally. The influence of Chandi is well-known to the different villages of the region and the people from even distant places flock to it for worship.

The *Deyashi*—Sanatan Bauri—considers the deities as his family deities. But he thinks that the deities look after all the people who worship them with utmost devotion. The appearance of the goddess Chandi in the house of the Bauri is shrouded in a hearsay which runs as follows. In the remote past period an old woman was going to the nearest town Dubrajpur for selling charcoal. On the road she met another old woman who requested the former to take with her a wicker basket containing some rags. At that request the Bauri old woman became puzzled and she wanted to know the utility of bringing the rags in a basket to her home. The other old woman assured her that it would be a blessing for her in due course. The Bauri old woman acted accordingly and kept the basket with rags inside the house. The Bauri old woman again met that old woman in dream and the latter disclosed that she was the goddess Chandi herself. She told the Bauri woman to conduct her worship by establishing her images in the form of stone slabs which the former would find at her door step in the early morning. When awakened in the morning the Bauri woman collected, with great reverence, three stone slabs nearabout her house and placed these under a tree.

From that very moment the worship of Chandi started under the direct supervision of the Bauri community.

From that period various supernatural events had taken place and the influence of the deity spread through the region. During the life-time of present *Deyashi* the fame of Chandi reached its peak. This is illustrated by the following fact. During the time of Sanatan *Deyashi's* father one gentleman of the village offered in the name of Chandi an earthen pot full of sweet blobs (*manda*) which were kept aside by the father of Sanatan. At the time of cleaning the eating place the mother of Sanatan touched that earthen vessel. On hearing this Sanatan's father decided that the sweets could not be offered to the deity and he immediately kept the pot away from the original place. After this Sanatan's mother took one of the sweet blobs from that rejected vessel and gave it to Sanatan's elder brother to eat. As a result of this Sanatan's elder brother got cholera immediately. Sanatan's father hurriedly sat in meditation and prayed before the goddess Chandi for her worship with fresh sweet blobs, and at the same time he began to rebuke the deity for her evil influence on his son. Sanatan's father continued to chastise the deity all day long and he lost the power of speech. Sanatan's mother also became sick and gradually her ailment increased. In the evening she took to bed and lost her power of speech. A few hours later when her sons went to call her for taking meal they saw that their mother had passed away silently. Sanatan's father followed his wife. He died in coma state. The people came to believe that both Sanatan's parents were severely punished by the goddess Chandi on account of the foolish action of Sanatan's father.

At that time Sanatan was 6 or 7 years old. He became frightened to see the goddess Chandi's evil influence over his parents and elder brother. Sanatan came out of the house and began to roam about door to door. After the death of Sanatan's father the worship of Chandi was stopped and Sanatan was the prospective *Deyashi* after the death of his father. But Sanatan was so frightened that he wanted to give up the propitiation of the deity in question. While he was roaming here and there living on the mercy of the villagers, he felt that some sort of power was always by his side to protect him from all calamities. One day when Sanatan was sleeping in an open verandah of a

villager belonging to Sadgop caste he dreamt that the goddess Chandi herself gave him instruction to continue her worship. At this Sanatan could not keep himself aloof from his hereditary profession. Gradually he became *Deyashi* of the goddess Chandi and started her worship regularly. He claimed that he received training for worship and the necessary incantations from Chandi herself who instructed him through supernatural devices.

The special worship of Chandi takes place on every Sunday besides the daily worship. The annual festival is held on the third day of the Bengali month *Magh* (January-February). In this shrine of Chandi there are other deities, who are Manasa, two in number, Kali, whose annual worship takes place in the month of *Agrahayana* (November-December) and the Dana—a supernatural deity whose seat is seen at the courtyard of the house where Manasa and Kali are placed. Chandi of Metela has exerted her influence not only on the inhabitants of her own village but she has also been able to attract the attention of people from a large number of villages. The goddess Chandi is worshipped by the people of more than 30 villages of the locality and is intimately connected with these villages. During different periods of the year the goddess Chandi is ceremonially brought to these villages for the worship at the village level. Specially at the time of break out of any epidemic the worship of the deity is conducted with great devotion.

The shrine of Chandi at Khairadihi village is well-known to all. This deity is known as Mangal Chandi. There are altogether 10 stone images representing the deity. These are placed on a wooden throne which is situated on an altar made of bricks. The deity Mangal Chandi is worshipped by Sri Anath Roy—a Brahmin belonging to Parasia village. Sri Balaram Debangsi, the present *Deyashi* of the goddess is in charge of all the performances relating to the propitiation of Mangal Chandi who is regarded as the family deity of this particular family. This family has been keeping this deity for 10 generations. It is said that about 500 years ago one Umacharan Das of the family concerned went out to visit his relative at a distant village. While he was passing alone through a dense forest he lost his way and began to roam about here and there. Suddenly he found an old woman who was very thirsty. When Sri Das

came to know this, he hurriedly brought water from a nearby stream and offered it to the old woman. At this the latter became very pleased and enquired from him the reason for roaming about in the forest. Sri Das told her that he was going to his relative's village but, as ill luck would have it, he had lost the way and became puzzled. The old woman gave him instruction to recognize the path leading to his destination. She accompanied him to the end of the forest and then she suddenly vanished. During the late hours of night Sri Das dreamt that a very old woman introduced herself as the goddess Mangal Chandi herself. She gave instruction to arrange for her propitiation at his own village. She also pointed out that in the knee-deep water of the tank situated along side his residence there were a few stone slabs embedded in water. Those should be established ceremonially in a temple as Mangal Chandi. Sri Das did it accordingly. From that very day the goddess Mangal Chandi became known as the family deity of Umacharan Das. After a few years, a severe small pox epidemic broke out in the village. The villagers were puzzled and they took all possible steps to check the disease but failed. At last the leading persons of the village discussed amongst them and decided to approach the family deity of the Tantubaya caste for her grace. They immediately arranged for her worship and offered the village ceremonially to her. It was surprising to see that the severity of the disease abated gradually and ultimately it came to an end. From that moment Mangal Chandi became the village deity and in course of time her influence spread throughout the whole region.

Besides daily worship, the annual festival of the goddess Mangal Chandi is held on the third Tuesday of the Bengali month *Chaitra* (February-March). During the annual festival Manasa deities of two neighbouring villages are brought in this temple for one week. Mangal Chandi visits the different villages of the region with which she has ceremonial connection throughout the year. During the time of epidemic in any village she is especially brought with due honour and is worshipped with pomp and eclat.

Chandi of Lauberia village is a family deity of a Bauri community. This deity is akin to the goddess Chandi at Metela village but unlike the latter, the deity at Lauberia is situated

inside a mud-built house of the Bauri family. The deity is represented by a stone slab and on whole body of which there are silver rings and knobs as ornaments. The deity is placed on a wooden throne. Chandi is associated with two other deities—Manasa and Sitala. The shrine of Chandi at this village is in the keeping of the particular Bauri family and they work as *Deyashi* of deity. Rampada Babri is present chief *Deyashi* of the goddess Chandi. Being a family deity of Bauris of a particular village, the goddess Chandi is regularly worshipped by all caste people including the Brahmins living in a large number of villages of the region under study.

About 500 years ago a woman named Jagati belonging to the Bauri family in question went to her father-in-law's house at a village named Birkalti to settle there after marriage. She used to go out for fishing regularly with other women of the community. One day while collecting small fishes and mussel shells by hand net in the shallow water of a tank, her hands struck a piece of stone lying under water. The same thing was repeated daily at the time of fishing at that tank. This particular happening enraged the woman and one day she took out that stone and threw it away at one corner of the courtyard of her house. After the lapse of a few days Jagati got a divine instruction in a dream that the piece of stone, which she brought home from the tank, was not an ordinary stone but the goddess Chandi herself. Through the dream the deity expressed her desire that she should be worshipped by the family members of Jagati. In the early morning Jagati went to her father's residence at Lauberia village and disclosed everything to her father. On hearing this he was overwhelmed with joy and told her how fortunate she was to have the grace of goddess. The father of Jagati immediately rushed to Birkalti village and brought that piece of stone with great joy to his home and established it there as the goddess Chandi. From that moment Chandi became his household deity. They began to worship her and the eldest member of the family became known as chief *Deyashi* as he was engaged to officiate as priest. After a couple of years a serious type of epidemic in the form of cholera broke out at Lauberia village and all the people became nervous and began to run about in panic. At last the *Deyashi* family came forward and with full confidence they arranged for worship of the

goddess Chandi to get rid of epidemics. An all-village worship was conducted in which the Bauri *Deyashi* played the role of propitiator on behalf of the villagers. It was a matter of great surprise that on the following day the number of deaths from the epidemic suddenly fell to its minimum and the affected persons began to come round gradually. Ultimately the village was saved by the mercy of the deity. The people of the area began to think of the power of that deity after that miraculous happening and most of the villagers began to call at the Bauri family to worship the goddess Chandi at their critical situations in day-to-day life. On getting a good return the leading villagers also took up the responsibility of annual propitiation of the deity. In course of time the villages had been offered to the goddess ceremonially through the Bauri *Deyashi*, who began to visit the said villages accompanied by the deity at the appointed date and time. At present there are at least 80 villages under her direct control where the deity is ceremonially brought and worshipped with due honour. The annual worship of the goddess Chandi is held at her original residence on the first day of the month of *Magh* (February-March) which is known as *Akkhyen* day.¹⁰

The shrine of Chandi at Bhanra village belongs to the Bauri community. At the extreme end of the village the Bauri community resides. The shrine of Chandi is situated at the foot of an old tamarind tree. There is an earth-mound on which several pieces of vermilion painted black stone slabs are planted. Just beside the shrine of Chandi the house of Sakti Dalui is situated. This particular family is the organiser of the worship of Chandi. The male members of the family work as the traditional priests of the deity. But at present the worship of the deity has been totally stopped due to the demise of Rasik Dalui, the father of Sakti.

The deity is about 600 years old. In the remote past the ancestor of this particular Bauri family was blessed with the grace of the deity as he was a god-fearing man and used to pass his days honestly with profound faith in the supernatural in spite of his extreme poverty. One night the goddess Chandi herself approached before him through dream and she expressed her desire to be propitiated publicly in that village. The man concerned did not agree to that proposal as he was very poor

and almost homeless. The goddess told him that if he tried his level best to arrange for the worship with due reverence, his poverty and distress would come to an end, otherwise, he and his family members would face disaster. On getting such directives the person concerned cleaned the jungle by the side of his house and established the goddess on an earthen altar. The goddess Chandi gave him, it is said, the actual instruction regarding her existence beside some stone slabs lying at a particular place on the bank of the Bakreswar river. With the help of directions given through the dream by the deity it was easy for him to collect the stone slabs as the goddess. The post of the *Deyashi* or official worshipper is hereditary. This family has been worshipping the deity for six generations one after another. But it is customary that all the persons should receive the directives from the deity herself through dream for doing the work of her worship. After the death of Rasik Dalui, five years ago, his son Sakti Dalui did not receive any instruction from the deity, and this is why the worship of the goddess Chandi has been stopped. Sakti Dalui and his family members show due regard to the deity but they do not dare to directly propitiate her without divine permission.

Chandi of Bhanra was an influential deity just like that of Metela. She had a large number of villages under her possession. She used to visit these villages and was ceremonially worshipped by the villagers at the different times of the year. The people from the different villages occasionally come to the deity when in presence of the Bauri family concerned offer *pujas* silently. On some festive occasions specially on the *Akkhyen* day the shrine is cleaned and washed with cowdung solution. A lamp is lit before the deity and a Bauri priest is called to worship her duly.

Shrines of Manasa

The goddess Manasa has well-developed and famous shrines at four villages, viz., Joydev-Kenduli, Bhanra, Tantipara and Metela. In some of the villages under study the goddess Manasa is present along with Dharmaraj; but in these four villages her presence is important due to her influence over a large tract of land. At the eastern end of Joydev-Kenduli village the shrine of Manasa is seen in Bagdipara. There is a dilapidated brick temple.

The temple is east-faced. Inside the temple a long baick-built altar is seen on which the deity is placed. The goddess Manasa is represented by a large and heavy stone slab ornamented with the figures of snakes. This deity is popularly known as Chintamani Manasa. She is associated with other five deities who are regarded as her attendants. All the stone images are decorated with the figures of snakes. There is one Manasa-Ghot or engraved pot of Manasa in front of these deities. Chintamani Manasa is a well-known goddess not only in this village but her influence is spread over the different villages on the both sides of the Ajay river.

Chintamani Manasa is the family deity of Madan Bagdi. His ancestors were fortunate in having such an important deity through some supernatural ways. All members of this particular family recall a story that has been handed down through generations. Long long ago a fisherman named Dikhu Dhibar accompanied by a number of other fishermen was fishing in a stream of Ajay river, named Jamdaha. They threw a large net in the deep water for catching large fishes. But due to a heavy pull from the bottom of water all the fishermen were drowned. After great difficulty the drowned persons were brought out of water. But the leader Dikhu could not escape due to the trick of Chintamani Manasa who lived in the stream. Dikhu was brought out of water by the villagers on the next day. On the other hand, Chintamani Manasa also came out of water and placed herself on the embankment of the river. The ancestor of Madan Bagdi dreamt the following night that the Chintamani Manasa told him that she was waiting at Jamdaha in a distressing condition. She requested the person concerned to rescue her and arrange for her worship in their family. The ancestor of Madan Bagdi communicated the matter to his neighbours, who immediately resolved to bring Chintamani Manasa with regard. In the morning the leading persons of the Bagdi community accompanied by a group of drummers went to Jamdaha. The ancestors of Madan Bagdi took the deity represented by large stone slab on his head and brought it to his home. A temporary hut was built and the deity was ceremonially established. From that very day Chintamani Manasa has been propitiated by the Bagdi family concerned.

The tradition behind the emergence of Chintamani Manasa

at Jamdaha even now influences the life activities of the fishermen of this locality. Before starting on a large fishing operation in the Jamdaha, it is customary that they should offer a *puja* with betels and betelnuts in the name of Chintamani on the previous day. The maiden catch should be offered to Chintamani shrine. The deity is worshipped by the *Deyashi*—Madan Bagdi—himself. The annual worship of Chintamani Manasa is held on the day of *Dasahara*.¹¹ On the day *homa* is performed and it is conducted by the Brahmin priest of the Bagdis. A large number of devotees assemble on this day, at the shrine of the deity for offering *pujas*. The goddess Chintamani is ceremonially connected with large number of villages and at the different periods of the year she visits these villages and thereby receives worship from the villagers. Chintamani Manasa is worshipped with great fervour by the villagers during the time of epidemic.

The shrine of Manasa of Bhanra is also situated in the Bagdipara. Manasa deity is represented by two *Manasa Bari*¹² and one stone slab placed on an earthen altar inside a straw thatched mud-built house. It faces the eastern direction. By the side of this there is another room where the earthen image of goddess Kali is seen. A *natmandir* is erected in front of the house where the deities reside. In between these there is one *tulshi-mancha*¹³ or the raised platform on which basil plant (*ocimum sanctum*) is grown. Just by the side of the shrine of Manasa the shrine of Brahmachari is seen at the foot of a *Manasa tree*. Abadhut Bagdi is the present *Deyashi* of this deity. His uncle got a divine instruction to arrange for the worship of Manasa. He was directed in a dream by the deity herself to collect her from the stream of Bakreswar river known as Bhonr Chandi. The uncle of Abadhut worked according to the instruction and he established the deity represented by a piece of stone in a small hut. Gradually the fame of the deity began to spread throughout the locality. During the time of epidemic the deity is ceremonially invited by the people of the villages concerned and special worship is arranged. The cases of snake-bites are also dealt with before the deity. Formerly the goddess Manasa had direct connection with 22 villages of the locality. But now-a-days the connection has been severed due to the inability of the present *Deyashi* to maintain the formalities in this connection. Beside the daily worship of the deity by the *Deyashi* himself, the special

worship is held on *Baga panchami*¹⁴ or *Bak panchami* by the Brahmin priest of the Bagdis. On every Sunday people from the different villages visit the shrine of Manasa and offer their *pujas* through the *Deyashi*.

In the Tantipara village the shrine of Manasa is situated in the house of a fisherman community. The Manasa is represented by a black stone slab placed on an wooden throne. The temple is made of mud walls and covered with corrugated iron sheets. It is south-facing. In front of the temple there is one *natmandir* which is also roofed by corrugated iron sheets. Beside the *natmandir* one *tulshimanacha* is seen. Manasa of Tantipara is the household deity of Nityananda Dhibar. But gradually she has become known as the village deity exerting influence over a large tract of land. People flock together at the shrine of Manasa during the different periods of the year with different intentions. The deity is taken to the different households on the various socio-religious occasions.

Long long ago the ancestor of Nityananda Dhibar was engaged in fishing in the shallow water of Bakreswar river. At that time he came across a smooth piece of black stone which he examined and threw away. At night he had a dream in which the goddess Manasa told him that she resided in the piece of stone which he threw away with negligence. The goddess gave him instruction to pick it up with reverence and bring it home. She also gave him the directive to arrange for her regular worship. It was done accordingly. Besides the daily worship by the *Deyashi*, the annual worship is held on the *sankrant* of the Bengali month *Sravana* (July-August) which is done by the Brahmin priest Sakha Krishna Chakravorty.

Metela village has a special seat for Manasa deity. But throughout the year it remains devoid of any idol as the deity in question does not belong to this village. On the eve of *puja* of Manasa, the goddess comes from a distant village known as Agar. It is a village in the Police Station of Suri and is inhabited by Brahmin, Sadgop, Keyot, Bagdi and Bauri castes. The Manasa of Agar village is a famous deity and she is connected directly with a large number of far and near villages. The shrine of this deity is situated inside a Brahmin household. The shrine of Manasa is situated inside a mud-walled straw thatched house. On an earthen altar there is a wooden throne which

accommodates the three stone idols of Manasa—*Barama*, *Mejoma*, and *Chotama*.¹⁵ Below these three images there are a few clay and wooden houses. Of these three deities, Chotama travels from village to village and is worshipped by the devotees. There are some special villages where these clay or wooden horses are ceremonially sent as the deity's representative. These horses are categorically marked according to the villages. Metela village is in association with such a clay horse. On the previous day of worship the clay horse for Metela village is taken away by the *Deyashi* in the accompaniment of a large gathering from the village. People belonging to the different castes and classes form a long procession and accompany the celebrated clay horse with full devotion. The seat for Manasa is now situated inside the temple of Dharmaraj and she is propitiated there individually. There is no fixed day of worship of Manasa. During the rainy months an auspicious day is fixed by the leading villagers and then arrange for bringing the clay horse representing the goddess Manasa from Agar village. After the day of worship the clay horse is returned to the original shrine after the observance of similar formalities. The *atan* or seat of Manasa is kept intact throughout the year. It is ceremonially worshipped by the Brahmin priest and on special occasions, viz., *Bak Panchami*, *Savan Sankranti*, the *atan* is propitiated by the priest on behalf of all the villagers. The *atan* consists of a small wooden throne on which a red cloth is spread. At the different places of the throne there are vermilion marks.

Shrines of Mahadana

Mahadana resides in the open field as by nature he does not like any covering over his head. Shibpur village has a famous shrine of Mahadana at the western end in the midst of the paddy fields. As a deity Mahadana is very influential, he is remembered almost every day by the villagers. By nature he is gentle but in case if he is annoyed, misfortune befalls. The shrine of Mahadana is represented by a small-sized brick platform on a raised ground at the corner of tank named *Sunripukur*. The platform possesses a large number of old and new clay horses which are offered during worship. By the side of the shrine of Mahadana a small platform made of bricks is seen which is known as the shrine of Brahmadaitya. It is believed that Mahadana sometimes lives

under the water of *Sunripukur* and at the dead hours of night he comes out of water. Mahadana, it is believed, wanders about here and there in the village and its neighbouring localities riding on a horseback. Some people claim that they have heard the sound of the stepping of the horse at late night. People recall from generation to generation various events relating to Mahadana.

The annual worship of Mahadana takes place on *Akkhyen* day, i.e., first day of the Bengali month of *Magh* (January-February). Besides this, Mahadana is worshipped daily by the *Deyashi*, who is a Bagdi by caste. The annual ceremony is attended by all the villagers belonging to the different castes and communities when various offerings are made on behalf of the worshippers including the sacrifices of fowl, pigeon and sugarcane.

Mahadana of Metela village resides at the courtyard of the Bauri *Deyashi* belonging to the famous Chandi already discussed. There is a small brick-built platform known as the *than* of Mahadana. The villagers believe that Mahadana is a very vindictive deity and thereby the people try to keep aloof from him. He may exert his evil influence on any person specially the pregnant women if the latter fail to follow the customary rules during the period of pregnancy. The *Deyashi* is quite aware of his existence and also that he could possess on different persons. It is believed that Mahadana permanently lives in the nearby tank and during festive occasions he comes to the *than* for getting special worship. The grandfather of the present *Deyashi* went there in connection with Mahadana residing in that tank. While he was treating the case of a woman who gave birth to still-born babies by the adoption of magical procedures he found out that it was caused by Mahadana residing in the tank. He then applied all his magical techniques to bring the deity under control. After continuous attempt Mahadana approached the *Deyashi* in the late night and expressed his desire to be propitiated every year. In return Mahadana would exert his influence in favour of the *Deyashi*. The *Deyashi* agreed to it and he ceremonially established the *than* of Mahadana at the shrine of Chandi. The annual worship of Mahadana is held with pomp on the third day of *Magh* (January-February). Besides this, Mahadana is worshipped at his original shrine in

the water of the tank on the first day of *Magh* (January-February) when a pig is sacrificed and the chopped off head is thrown in the water.

Shrines of Kali

The goddess Kali is not a folk deity in the real sense of the term but it is to be noted that this particular goddess is worshipped at the different levels of culture. From time immemorial the goddess Kali has been receiving the offerings and sacrifices of the various grades of people and the nature of worship has been fashioned according to the life-ways and thought-ways of the grades of people concerned. In this study the goddess Kali worshipped at the three different villages—Shibpur, Metela and Bhanra—have been taken into consideration because of the two important reasons,—firstly, the worship of the goddess Kali is conducted by the lower caste people according to their indigenous thinking. Secondly, during worship the goddess Kali is treated by the rural folk as a part of the folk deities when the same procedure is used in the worship and the same pattern of activities is performed. The goddess Kali in these villages is worshipped directly by the lower caste *Deyashis* themselves though the offerings come from the different higher and lower caste people. In these features the goddess Kali is similar to the traditional folk deities.

At Shibpur village the worship of the goddess Kali is organized by the Bagdi community. The shrine of the goddess Kali is situated at the western corner of the village. The temple is constructed with mud walls and thatched with corrugated iron sheets. There is a raised platform on which the earthen idol of the goddess is placed. On the second day of worship the idol is ceremonially immersed but the straw framework is kept on the altar throughout the year. Three *bari* or earthen pots full of water are ceremonially preserved inside the shrine. These three *bari* belong to Kali, Bhairab and Mahadana. In front of the shrine of the goddess Kali there is a seat for Mahadana. It is situated under a date palm tree. The goddess Kali is regarded as the family deity of the Bagdis. But in course of time she has been able to exert an influence on the different communities of the village. The name of the present *Deyashi* is Nepal Bagdi.

Long long ago his ancestor went to take bath in a neighbouring tank. At a distance a red lotus attracted his attention. He thought of worshipping a deity with that flower but he felt helpless because of the fact that he had no deity. After a few days he dreamt a dream when the goddess Kali appeared before him and told that she was residing in that tank just beside the blooming red lotus. The goddess ordered him to rescue her and arrange for worship. On the next morning a few leading persons of the Bagdi community accompanied by the drum beaters went to that particular tank. All the persons got down in the water and tried their level best to pick up the stone image but to no effect. It was too heavy to bring out of water. On the next night the divine order from the goddess Kali came in the form of dream in which the ancestor of the present *Deyashi* was asked to make clay image of her and arrange for worship.

All the villagers, irrespective of castes and classes, are directly connected with the goddess Kali. All have deep faith in her. When a marriage party enters in the village, the married couple should, first of all, approach the goddess and bow down before her. Otherwise, it may lead to serious consequences. Once a marriage party was passing through the road in front of the shrine of the goddess Kali. They did not care to stop at the shrine and show proper respect to the deity. No sooner than they crossed the shrine, a mishap occurred. The handles of the palanquin broke from the middle. From that very day it had become the regular custom of the whole locality for the married couple to bow down before the deity.

The annual worship of the goddess Kali is held on the new-moon day of *Kartick* (October-November). Besides this, the deity is also worshipped on the *Akkhyen* day when the annual worship of Mahadana takes place. The worship is conducted by the Bagdi *Deyashi* himself in association with other members of the community. During annual worship a *homa* is performed which is conducted by the Brahmin priest of the Bagdi community.

The shrines of the goddess Kali are also found at Metela and Bhanra villages. Both of these are represented by earthen idols and are worshipped on the new-moon day in the month of *Agrahayana* (November-December) and for this reason they are known as *Aguney Kali* or the goddess Kali worshipped in the

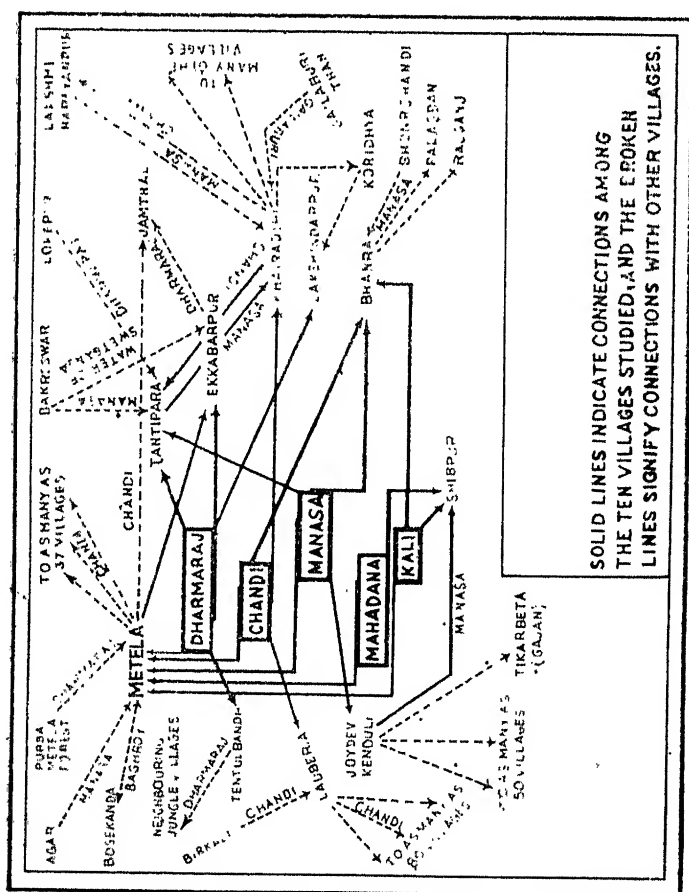


FIG. 4.4 : Inter-connecting Pattern of different Villages through the Propitiation, Invitation and Visit of Village Deities

month of *Agrahayana*. In Metela the goddess Kali is established inside the room where the *Deyashi* of Chandi performs his magico-religious activities before the devotees and the patients coming for treatment. After worship the deity is kept for one year and then it is replaced by a new one. Similarly, the *Deyashi* of Manasa at Bhanra establishes an *Aguney Kali* inside a room just beside the shrine of Manasa. He prescribes different medicines to his client-patients in front of the deity. It is also kept for one year and then on the eve of next year's worship it is ceremonially immersed. The goddess Kali at both the places is worshipped by the *Deyashis* themselves. But the *homa* performances which are observed on the day of worship are presided over by the Brahmin priest serving the community concerned.

These five different types of deities, who reside at the ten villages studied, have been exerting their direct influence on the people of numerous villages of the region extending from Bakreswar to Shyamarupa's garh (Fig. 4.4.). These deities are to be found at the different stages of development so far as the level of sanskritization is concerned. Similarly, their direct and indirect connection with the different castes and communities are noteworthy, to a large extent, and all these have moulded the socio-ritual background of the rural folk. All aspects of their life are inextricably interwoven with the rites and ritual centering round the folk deities.

NOTES

1. It is a hall in front of a temple or shrine where musical performances and devotional dances are held. During ceremonial occasions the *natmandirs* of different deities of the village become the centres of attractions and people belonging to all castes and classes assemble under the shade of those *natmandirs* to participate and enjoy the different phases of the festivals. These are constructed on iron or concrete pillars, the overhead structure is covered by straw or corrugated iron sheets. There are a few *natmandirs* which are even constructed by bamboo poles and thatched with palmyra palm leaves. Whatever may be the materials for constructions, which vary according to the economic conditions of the organisers, the *natmandirs* play an essential role in the proper reflection of village mind through the

joint participation of village-level festivals. Besides, these *natmandirs* act as the common meeting platforms where different group discussions are held. In many villages marriage ceremonies are performed here when these are decorated with twigs of mango tree and flowers prepared by coloured papers. At other times these *natmandirs* are used for temporary shelters of many villagers to pass their idle hours by gossiping.

2. An indigenous deity worshipped by the Mal community. This deity is seen at Metela village. There is a large garden at the north-western corner of the village where a brick-built altar is noticed. On this altar there is a vermilion painted stone piece which is said to be the goddess Palashi. The name of the deity is apprehended to be derived from *palash* tree (*Butea frondosa*) which were in abundance in this locality. The deity residing at the foot of a *palash* tree and surrounded by the trees belonging to the same species became gradually known as *Palashi*. The worship of *Palashi* is made once a year. On the *Akkhyen* day, i.e., on the first day of Bengali month *Magh* all people concerned assemble here and perform the short ceremony which consists of worship and sacrifice of hens, pigs and sometimes goats. The deity is said to keep a constant watch over the activities of the villagers and she comes forward to protect the people in times of danger.
3. The Brahmin community engaged in the profession of astrology. The villagers approach them for consulting the astrological problems relating to the different phases in the life cycle, e.g., birth, marriage, death and funeral ceremonies. The presence of Grahacharya is essential at the time of marriage, *sraadh* and *homa* performances during various socio-religious festivals. Grahacharya plays the most important role in the village society as he is the person who communicates the people all about auspicious moments for starting wedding and harvesting. It is not essential for the villagers to pay him in cash. He pays a house to house visit during different ceremonial occasions of his clients and collects payments mostly in kinds. In the villages studied the Grahacharyas are popularly known as *ganak* or those who are engaged in astrological calculations. These people receive *dana* or gifts during *sraadh* ceremonies of their clients and for this reason they are looked down upon by the orthodox Brahmins.
4. *Gaila buri* is a kind of Manasa who has taken her seat in the mango grove at the southern corner of Khairadihi village. Formerly she was the chief tutelary deity of the village residing in the midst of jungles and bushes. At present all the village festivals have got an underlying connection with this deity. The newly married couples should visit the *than* of *Gaila buri* for asking her blessings for favour of trouble-free married life. She is also worshipped by the villagers during new rice-eating ceremony, first rice-eating of the children and such other socio-religious activities. On the whole, the day-to-day life of villagers is closely connected with the *Gaila buri*.

5. The main ascetic. When the ascetics or *bhaktyas* take initiation before Dharmaraj, it is customary that one of them come forward to take the leadership. He is known as the principal or *mul-bhaktya*. The man who wants to be initiated as *mul-bhaktya* should possess good personality, sense of responsibility and religious trend of mind. The *mul-bhaktya* takes the lead in all sorts of activities to be conducted before Dharmaraj, and he is solely responsible for performing various feats and in controlling all affairs of his subordinate *bhaktyas*.
6. The indigenous village deity represented by a number of small stone slabs on a specially raised mud-built platform. During the worship of Dharmaraj at Metela the *than* of Bagh Roy is specially cleaned with cow-dung paste and is decorated with *alpana* by the women of the lower section of the community. It is the place from where the *bhaktyas* ceremonially receive *bhanrals*. Both rice beer-*bhanral* and *dudh-bhanral* are supplied from here after a token payment made in cash or in kind. An image of tiger is prepared at this time with mud and is placed on the raised platform. The link that still exists between the fully indigenous deity like Bagh Roy and the more or less sanskritized Dharmaraj put forward many interesting points.
7. The iron rod is pierced vertically in the extended tongue of the *bhaktyas*. It is customary that the *bhaktyas* who want to receive *jiv-ban* should come to the embankment of a particular tank in the evening prior to the actual Chadak festival. They are to bring one metre long and narrow solid iron rods smeared with clarified butter. The village blacksmith is the authorised person to organise the *jiv-ban* ceremony. A large number of *bhaktyas* approach the blacksmith for the piercing of their tongues with the iron rods. It seems that it is an easy affair for the blacksmith who possesses time-long experience in this line. He extends out the tongue of the approaching *bhaktya* and suddenly pierces its middle portion. This process goes on one after another. The *bhaktyas* belonging to all age-groups receive *jiv-ban* and then dance throughout the night encircling the shrine of Dharmaraj.
6. *Bala-bhaktyas* are taken as the close associates of the deity concerned. In Metela village there is a particular custom that a man from the Goala families should come forward to act an *bala-bhaktya*. Sometimes he is regarded as the essential factor in initiating all sorts of activities relating to the performance of the *bhaktyas* before Dharmaraj. The barber shaves the *bala-bhaktya* first even in presence of the *mul-bhaktya*. In times of any form of disputed atmosphere the *mul-bhaktya*, it is seen, asks the advice and suggestions from the *bala-bhaktya* to tide over the crisis. The *bala-bhaktya* is always conscious of his glorified divine connection with Dharmaraj and he tries to discharge his duties categorically assigned to him.
9. A deity of malevolent nature. It is believed that the unnatural death

of a Brahmin results in the development of this deity—the Brahmadaitya, who is thought to reside in a tree of the village specially the wood apple tree. In each and every village, in the district of Birbhum, the *than* of Brahmadaitya is a common affair. People always try to get rid of his wrath by occasional offerings made before his shrine. There are some villages where the *than* of Brahmadaitya becomes the main centres of attraction during the observance of village-level festivals. The lower section of the people take initiative in the worship of Brahmadaitya. He is not worshipped by any shastric way—people adore him through their own indigenous system. Sometimes the Brahmin priest also worships him and during which the Brahmadaitya, as a natural consequence, receives shastric treatment.

10. The first day of the Bengali month *Magh* is known as *Akkhyen* day. This day has got a very important role in the socio-religious life of the lower section of people in the rural areas. It is the day when all the village deities living at the different parts of the country are ceremonially worshipped.
11. It is the tenth day of the bright half of the Bengali month *Jyaishta*. On this day the river Ganga is ceremonially worshipped. According to some, it indicates the anniversary of the day when Bhagiratha brought down the river Ganga from Heaven.
12. The engraved pots of Manasa which are popularly known as *Manasa bari*. These are ceremonially worshipped on the prescribed day. In some shrines where there is no idol or any representation of like nature, the *Manasa bari* is engaged to represent the deity.
13. The raised platform made of mud or with bricks and cement where the sacred basil plant is implanted. It is regarded as the sacred spot and God is believed to reside here. The housewives show lighted lamp before the *mancha* every evening and bow down in the expectation of trouble-free family life. The aged persons of the family pour water at the root of the sacred basil plant just after taking bath in the morning. All the family worships and other socio-religious affairs are conducted before the *tulsimancha*. Therefore, it has got a special role in the family concerned.
14. It is the fifth day of the bright half of the Bengali month *Bhadra*. On this day the worship of the goddess Manasa is widely practised. Various feasts are shown by the *Deyashi* on this day before the shrine of Manasa. The songs praising the goddess are sung by the worshippers throughout the night. It is believed that the snakes—Manasa's companions—come out of their holes during the dead hours of night to enjoy the auspicious moment of Manasa worship. People are in the habit of feeling the existence of snakes in the neighbouring bushes and jungles who roam about with profound joy and sympathy for their mistress—the goddess Manasa.
15. The Manasa of Agar village is represented by three separate deities—elder, middle and younger. Three different pieces of stone images are

found to be seated on a wooden throne. The younger one is dynamic in nature and she travels in the different villages as and when required. The *Deyashi* carries the deity concerned accompanied by the headman of the allied village. The younger deity is popularly known as *Chotama* and the other two deities are recognised by the terms *Barama* and *Mejoma*. *Barama* and *Mejoma* are completely static—they never leave their seats. It is the duty of the *Chotama* to look into the various problems of the people in the villages of the whole region and thereby to suggest remedy. The suggestions of the goddess come through the “possessed” *Deyashi*, who, in course of his possession, communicates everything to the attending people.

Variegated Cults and Participating People

VARIOUS performances of folk cults that are centered round the propitiation of the different village deities already described bring forth tremendous excitement throughout the length and breadth of the region. The festivals connected with Dharmaraj, Chandi, Manasa, Mahadana and Kali take place at the different periods of the year and in which the people, irrespective of castes and communities, participate to celebrate these in a befitting manner. Various castes and communities work as active participants at the different phases of worship after forgetting traditional social norms and time-long usages. In the different categories of festival a concerted group life would be seen—the multifarious nature of hierarchical society becomes unified and all stand side by side on the common platform. The pattern of human behaviour thus flourished in the background of the folk cults collectively present a fruitful field of observing the nature and extent of corporate life of the rural folk.

We have already pointed out that the villages from where the different folk cults have been recorded are inhabited by diverse castes and communities. They live in an atmosphere of socio-cultural and religious stratification and under the background of this particular viewpoints the life-ways and thought-ways of the peoples have been fashioned. But during the observances of these folk cults the traditional stratified society vanishes for the time being—people belonging to the

different caste-groups behave in such a way as they are the members of a common familial group. In this chapter an attempt would be made to pinpoint the nature of participation of the different ethnic groups in the various spheres of folk festivals.

Cult of Dharmaraj at Tantipara

Dharmarajas of Tantipara village have a long history behind them. The two different Dharmaraj deities—one at Hat-tala and the other at Dhanyakuna—have got their own genesis and trend of propitiation. On the occasion of the annual worship of Dharmarajas of this village a large number of persons belonging to various castes and communities take part which would be the subject matter of this chapter. The annual worship of both Dharmarajas at Hat-tala and Dhanyakuna wards of Tantipara village takes place simultaneously and the nature and extent of propitiation are the same. But it is seen that the two wards stand against each other ceremonially and a keen competition is noticed in the different stages of observance of the festival.

The festival proper, *Gajan* starts from the *asthami* (i.e., the eighth day of the fortnight of a lunar month) prior to *Vaisakhi Purnima*. It is the day when the *ghot* is ceremonially placed before the deity. The drummers beat their drums incessantly and the people, irrespective of castes and classes flock to the shrines according to their inclination. After five days the ceremonial shaving¹ of the *Bhaktyas* or the active participants is held which is officiated by the village barber. All these activities are governed by a traditional chain of actions which are conditioned by various social customs and usages. It has already been mentioned that the two Dharmarajas of Tantipara are worshipped by the Brahmin priests. The large part of the expenditures is generally met from the production of 30 *bighas* of rent-free land dedicated to the village deities by a issueless wealthy person named Sri Raicharan Das sometime ago. Besides this, a kind of subscription is collected from the villagers according to their financial condition. Some amount of money is also being deposited at the different periods of the year through a customary way known as *marocha*². During the marriage ceremony held in the village the bride's party

TABLE 5.1 : Puja Committee of Hat-tala

Name	Age	Caste	Designation
1. Biman Behari Das	62	Tantubaya	Manager
2. Chandi Charan Acharya	61	Brahmin	Member
3. Bishnu Ch. Chattaraj	55	"	"
4. Santi Ranjan Das	48	Tantubaya	"
5. Asis Kumar Das	40	"	"
6. Santi Charan Dawn	52	Moyra	"
7. Gunadhar Das	54	Kumbhakar	"

TABLE 5.2 : Puja Committee of Dhanyakuna

Name	Age	Caste	Designation
1. Paran Chandra Das	68	Tantubaya	Manager
2. Prafulla Das	55	"	Asstt. Manager
3. Sridhar Roy	56	Brahmin	Member
4. Abinash Das	46	Tantubaya	"
5. Arun Chandra Das	49	"	"
6. Hare Krishna Dawn	57	Moyra	"

realises a ceremonial payment to be expended in the general welfare of the village. This ceremonial payment is known as *marocha*. The traditional committees for the organisation of the worship of Dharmaraj are composed of influential villagers who hold hereditary posts. On the eve of the annual festival of Dharmaraj these committees meet at the common places of the village and jointly frame the plan of the ensuing festival. The composition of the traditional *puja* committees have been given in Tables 5.1 and 5.2 (above).

The above traditional *puja* committees meet separately at the different places to suggest various measures in the successful observances of the festival. This festival is regarded as the chief village-level ceremony and, therefore, all possible attempts are taken to make it a grand success. Not only so, but Dharmaraj is known as the saviour and protector of the village and the villagers in all kinds of stresses and strains. As a natural consequence, the villagers feel it an urgent necessity to observe the annual festival of Dharmaraj in a befitting manner.

After ceremonial meeting is over the Managers of the *puja*

committees send formal invitation to the different traditional participants of the festival. The village barber starts his office first at the bank of a village tank where he performs the ceremonial shavings of the *Bhaktyas*. People belonging to different classes and caste-groups offer themselves as *Bhaktyas*. They also belong to the different age-groups. It is customary that a large number of persons undertake ceremonial shaving from the village barber and they would work together to celebrate the different phases of worship. Besides the Brahmin priests and other officials, the active help and co-operation of the *Bhaktyas* are essential during the festival.

In Tantipara village, the *Banamo*³ or the ceremonial bath of the *Baneswar* is conducted by the *Bhaktyas* on the third day before the *Purnima* or full-moon day. In this connection, it is essential to say a few words about the *Baneswar*. It consists of a flattened wooden slab at the one end of which there are a number of pointed iron sticks attached to it vertically. It is also known as *Bangosain* or *Baneswari*.

On the day of initiation of the *Bhaktyas* the *Baneswar*⁴ is taken out of the temple of Dharmaraj. The *Bhaktyas* then carry the *Baneswar* on their shoulders and go to the village tank in a procession. They jointly praise in the name of Dharmaraj of the village and sometimes they also utter the names of the Dharmarajas of other neighbouring villages. The *Bhaktyas* move in the village roads and lanes with the *Baneswar* when they are followed by the villagers. The drummers beat their drums and thereby change the total atmosphere of the village. After reaching the tank the *Baneswar* is taken down and the *mul-Bhaktya* or the Chief of the *Bhaktyas* goes to the knee-deep water of the tank and places the *Baneswar* under the water for having it a bath. The *Bhaktyas* loudly ask for help and kindness of Dharmaraj during the ceremony of bath. Then the *Baneswar* is taken out of water, when the priest goes to it and smears vermilion mixed with oil on the wooden slab and offers a sacred thread to the *Baneswar*.

The *Banamo* is also held next day but with more pomp and eclat. The *Bhaktyas* accompanied by the drummers dance and sing in a wild manner. They halt at the different common places of the village when people specially the women pay

visit to the *Baneswar* and offer rice, vermilion, fruits and a few coins.

In the night the *Bhaktyas* again come out with the *Baneswar* in the village roads. The different deities of the village and other neighbouring region is ceremonially invited by them to take part in the festival. The Manasa from the house of a fisherman is brought out; a clay horse is collected from Lokepur and the *Adirey Dharma* is invited to the festival. All the villagers, *Bhaktyas*, *Baneswar* and other folk deities take active part in the dance and merry-making on the night prior to the actual date of worship. It is continued up to the dead hours of night.

Then comes the actual day of worship. It is the much awaited day for the villagers. The villagers prepare themselves in all aspects to observe the day with enjoyment and in association with friends and relatives. Each household of the village is crowded with relatives coming from distant places. Moreover, many people from neighbouring villages come to Tantipara to observe the various phases of the *Gajan* festival of Dharmaraj. In the morning the *Bhaktyas* move with the *Baneswar* through the village path which is known as *Grambera* or walking through the village. Then they proceed to the Kali temple of the village where a ceremonial call is given to the different Dharmarajas of the neighbouring locality. All of the *Bhaktyas* praise in the name of Dharmaraj. The attending villagers also join their voices. This ceremony is known as *Gajan Bandhan*. After this the *Bhaktyas* and the villagers return to the Dharma shrine when the actual worship is held. All the households of the village send offerings consisting of sun-dried rice, milk, sugar, sweets (*manda*) and fruits.

The worship is conducted by the traditional Brahmin priest assisted by the members of his community. The *Bhaktyas* do not interfere in the actual worship which is performed following the Shastric way. After the worship of the deity the *homa* or the burning of the sacred fire is held. It is attended by a large number of persons belonging to the higher caste-groups. The lower-caste people generally avoid these performances and they keep themselves away during the time. A large number of he-goats and he-sheep are sacrificed before the deity. Prior to the sacrifice of animals, the priest gives a ceremonial call to the

offerers of the he-goats or he-sheep to come to the place where the *homa* is being held with their respective animals. Suddenly a great sensation is felt amongst the large crowd. Everybody tries to come forward with the animal to be sacrificed as early as he can. The village barber and other influential persons try to control the tremendous crowd. The priest throws a petal of flower on the head of the animal to be sacrificed after uttering some incantations. It takes at least half an hour to complete the function. By this time the official sacrificer, Brahmin by caste, becomes ready with his sharp sword before the wooden stand for sacrifice. He then sacrifices the he-goats and he-sheep one by one before the deity. The assistants of the official sacrificer collect the chopped off heads and the left hind legs of the sacrificed animals. The rest portions are given to the respective persons.

The *Bhaktyas* then proceed to the village liquor booth to bring *bhanral*. All the *Bhaktyas* take one earthen pot or *bhanr*, supplied by the village potters, and fill it with rice. They place these on their heads and go in a line to the village liquor booth. The proprietor of the booth was previously informed through the traditional and ceremonial message from the organisers of the festival. Some large earthen pitcherfuls of rice beer are generally prepared with due purification. These pitchers are placed on the courtyard of the liquor shop which has been kept clean with cowdung paste. On reaching the said place, the *Bhaktyas* ceremonially bow down before the pitcherful of rice beer. Then they go round the pitchers for seven times and praise loudly in the name of Dharmaraj accompanied by the beating of drums. The *mul-Bhaktya* then comes forward and fills his own pot with rice beer taken from the pitcher. The other *Bhaktyas* follow him and all of them do accordingly. All the *Bhaktyas* then form a long queue with *mul-Bhaktya* standing in front and begin to proceed towards the Dharmaraj shrine. Two persons with incensers in their hands stand by the sides of the leading *Bhaktya*. They put incense profusely on fire which emit tremendous smoke. The drummers begin to dance and beat their drums as loudly as they can. While proceeding towards the shrine of Dharmaraj, the *Bhaktyas* become fainted one by one and fall down on the ground. They throw their hands and feet in a wild manner. The villagers believe that the *Bhaktyas*

have been "possessed" by Dharmaraj himself. The relatives and attendants of the respective *Bhaktiyas* are then seen to be busy in treating them with cold water and blowing of air by palm-leaf fans. All the people become very much enthusiastic to see the nature and extent of the "possession" of the *Bhaktiyas*. In the meantime, the "possessed" *Bhaktiyas* become normal and those who make late in the transformation are carried to the shrine of Dharmaraj where the priest pours bathing water of the deity on the head of the *Bhaktiya* concerned.

In the night the *Bhaktiyas* again go out to have a round through the village paths. One of the *Bhaktiyas* lies down on the *Baneswar* slab and the whole thing is carried by other *Bhaktiyas* on their shoulders. The villagers accompany the procession with profound devotion as it is thought that Dharmaraj himself is taking round through the different corners of the village. People take different vows during this time for fulfilling their various desires. It takes four or five hours to complete the rotation. The *Bhaktiyas* receive customary offerings in cash and in kinds from the different households.

Formerly *Chadak* or hook-swinging was held at Tantipara. But now-a-days it has become completely obliterated. A few feats like jumping on the prickly nightshade, striking of *babui* strips on the stretched arm of the *Bhaktiyas* still attract the attention of numerous devotees and spectators. On the night before worship the *Bhaktiyas* accompanied by the drummers go out to the outskirts of the village for ceremonial awakening of the bushes of prickly nightshade grown in abundance. Vermilion mixed with mustard oil is applied on some of the leaves of the plant after a short ceremony invoking the god Dharmaraj. During the same night *babui* grass stalks are also collected and brought ceremonially to the shrine of Dharmaraj. On the night after the performance of *Yajna* these feats are shown. Before this a short performance is held when all the *Bhaktiyas* lie down side by side on their backs and the Brahmin priest walks on them by placing his feet on their chests.⁵ As soon as it is effected, the *Bhaktiyas* stand up and become ready for other items. They place the uprooted prickly nightshade plants on the wide courtyard of the temples. Then praising in the name of Dharmaraj of Dhanyakuna and Hat-tala the *Bhaktiyas* somersault one after another over the pricks. The stalks of *babui*

grass are plaited to form flattened whip. One of the *Bhaktyas* stretches out his right arm in front of the temple and the other *Bhaktya* whips on it with full force. This is followed until all the *Bhaktyas* receive a number of such whips one after another. Then bringing of *agniban*⁶ from the house of the village blacksmith is held. One of the *Bhaktyas* is selected to carry the *agniban* on his head. A firepot is placed on his head and four burning torches are put crosswise on his body. These are prepared by wrapping rags at the two ends of a long iron rod. These are lit by applying kerosene oil. The *Bhaktya* carrying such *agniban* is directed to go round the temple; the blacksmith follows him who throws incense on the fire off and on to keep it burning. The *jivban*⁷ or piercing the tongue with an iron rod (one centimetre in diameter) is another important event which is conducted by the village blacksmith. This performance is made on the embankment of the tank where *Baneswar* takes his bath. The *Bhaktyas* ask for the grace of Dharmaraj loudly and intimate their reverence with folded hands. All the *Bhaktyas* then stand side by side with the *ban* in their hands. The blacksmith concerned approaches the *Bhaktyas* one after another and pulls out the tongue to pierce it abruptly with the iron rod or *ban*. The *Bhaktyas* with *jivban* start for the temple after making a round within the village. The *phulkhela* or playing with fire is the characteristic feature of Dharmaraj worship in Tantipara. A large fire-place is made by digging the earth in front of the temple and a heavy fire is lit with the help of charcoal and wooden faggots. The *Bhaktyas* stand surrounding the fire. Visitors keep a safe distance from the burning fire. The Brahmin priest comes first and worships the god of fire ceremonially for a few minutes. The *Bhaktyas* loudly praise in the name of Dharmaraj and suddenly begin to take out fire with their bare hands to throw towards each other and catch these again. The scene becomes very much attractive. When the fire blocks move to and fro in the air these give the very appearance of numerous flowers cutting through the darkness of the night.

With the completion of *phulkhela* the ceremonial shows of the *Bhaktyas* come to an end. They take rest for the rest of the night and meanwhile they take fruits and *sarbat*. On the next morning they, accompanied by the Brahmin priest and the

barber, start for the specified tank. The *Baneswar* is carried with them with the beating of drums. On reaching the tank the *Baneswar* is placed at the *ghat* and he is worshipped by the Brahmin priest. The barber supplies turmeric paste and mustard oil to all the *Bhaktyas* who are instructed to apply these on their bodies. Then the *Bhaktyas* put off their sacred threads and keep these on the stakes of *Baneswar*. All of them then return to the shrine of Dharmaraj and bow down before the deity. This marks the end of the ceremony.

Cult of Dharmaraj at Metela

Dharmaraj of Metela village is an age-old deity whose nature of propitiation is shrouded in various mysterious and hair-raising activities. All the villagers, irrespective of castes and communities, come forward to observe the ceremony of Dharma worship in their village. It has already been pointed out that the pattern of propitiation of Dharmaraj at Metela village has got some characteristic features of its own. The worship of Dharmaraj is not only associated with grandeurous observances but also there are some features which are deeply influenced by primitive beliefs and ideas. The people of the village observe the annual festival of Dharmaraj as the greatest occasion of the year. All the households are crowded with relatives coming from the distant villages. They are cordially invited by the hosts to come with their kiddies to enjoy the splendour of the festival of the village deity.

The annual festival of Dharmaraj is performed on the full-moon day of the month of *Vaisakh* (April-May). But the actual work starts at least two weeks ago. There is a formal village council formed by influential villagers including the Brahmin priest of Dharmaraj. The traditional headman, belonging to the *Goala* community, first of all arranges for the meeting of the formal village council. The village barber takes the charge of communicating the date and time of meeting to the different members. In this meeting the *Grahacharya* or village astrologer is ceremonially invited to find out the different auspicious moments when the performances are to be observed. The *Grahacharya*, in consultation with the priest of Dharmaraj arranges different timings for ceremonial observances in relation to the festival proper.

The ceremonial placing of *ghot* before the deity takes place three days before the *Purnima* or full moon and in this sphere the Brahmin priest officiates. The traditional drummers of Dharmaraj attend the site of worship in large numbers and begin to beat their drums at full speed which change abruptly the calm and quiet atmosphere of the village. On hearing the incessant sound of drums people belonging to different age-groups rush to the temple site and begin to enjoy the moment of commencement of the festival. The priest in presence of eminent villagers take formal promise before the deity to worship him duly on behalf of the whole villagers. There is no landed property for meeting the expenses of worship. Therefore, the worshippers are to depend on public subscriptions. There is a customary rule in the village to collect donations from the marriage parties in the name of Dharmaraj. The collections of the traditional village council that are made in the form of imposition of fines to the evil doers go to the general fund of Dharmaraj. Besides these, the payment made by the *Goala* families in this village at the time of marriage and *sraadh* ceremonies also help in forming a fabulous amount to be spent during the worship of Dharmaraj.

On the previous day of the festival proper the *Bhaktyas* undergo ceremonial shaving by the village barber who receives official invitation from the formal village council. The village barber's part is regarded as the most essential as he initiates the active participants of the festival. All the *Bhaktyas* who want to be initiated assemble at the village tank named Raghur Pukur and praise loudly in the name of Dharmaraj and Baghrai. The village barber shaves the *Bhaktyas* one by one and most of the time he is assisted by a number of his kinsmen as the number of *Bhaktyas* reaches more than one hundred. The barber and his assistants do not shave the persons belonging to the lower caste groups, viz., Dom, Bauri, Muchi, etc. They perform the act of initiation by shaving each other. It is customary to receive a token payment of 25 paise by the village barber from the *Bhaktyas* thus taking initiation. After the shavings are completed the *Bhaktyas* take holy dips in the tank concerned and they wear new clothes. The Brahmin priest then offers sacred threads to every one of them and in a short term ceremony he changes the *gotras* of the *Bhaktyas*. All the *Bhaktyas* then ask for

the blessings of Dharmaraj through the Brahmin priest who calls the *mul-Bhaktya* to receive the blessing-oriented petals of lotus on behalf of the whole *Bhaktya* community. From this very moment the *Bhaktyas* are identified as a single unit in which no restrictions regarding caste hierarchy, untouchability and similar other social phenomena are not followed. The *Bhaktyas* strictly observe certain rules and regulations in their daily mode of life. They are to take completely vegetarian diet and abstain from taking salt. The *Bhaktyas* are prevented from going to their houses or taking any active interest in their family life. In other words, they are to follow the ascetic way of life throughout the total period of worship. The *Bhaktyas* are allowed to enter into the temple and handle the deity without any sort of discrimination. But all the *Bhaktyas* must not work haphazardly. There is an orderly perspective in which the movements and nature of works is characteristically controlled. The *mul-Bhaktya*, who is selected on the basis of experience besides other essential qualifications, works as the controller of all the activities of the *Bhaktyas*.

The *Banamo* ceremony is held on the third day before the full-moon day or *Purnima*. The village *karmakar* prepares or repairs the *Baneswar* against some ceremonial payments. The *Baneswar* is taken out by the *Bhaktyas* and is placed on the *ghat* of a large tank at the western part of the village. The *mul-Bhaktya* then comes forward to hold the *Baneswar* with his two hands and thereby he goes down to the knee-deep water of the tank. The drummers begin to beat their drums, the *Bhaktyas* start praising in the name of Dharmaraj, the accompanying men, women and children express their joy through various sounds and noisy attempts. After giving a holy dip in the water of the tank the *Baneswar* is again placed at the *ghat* when the Brahmin priest applies vermilion mixed with oil over the wooden part of *Baneswar*. After this a worship is performed.

On the next day the *Bhaktyas* start to go round the village. One of the *Bhaktyas* takes the *Baneswar* on his shoulder and the others follow him. The drummers beat their drums at a rapid speed. The *Bhaktyas* praise in the name of Dharmaraj, Baghrai and other allied village deities at the time of roaming through the village paths along with *Baneswar*.

The *Baneswar* is then placed at the altar of the Bhairab

situated outside the temple of Dharmaraj. During night the *Bhaktiyas* go out in a body with the accompaniment of the drummers for *Nayabandh* to invite the *chadak* tree. After a prolonged ceremony it is pulled out of the tank; the *chadak* tree is then implanted upright on the ground by making a large hole of at least five feet depth.

On the following day the worship of Dharmaraj is held and in this the Brahmin priest and his associates play dominant roles. The actual worship starts at about 12 noon when the deity is decorated with white lotus and the whole atmosphere of the temple is made fragrant by the burning of profuse incense. The worship is immediately followed by the *Yajna* or the ceremonial burning of sacred fire. It is held in the *natmandir* and during which sanskritic procedures become dominant and the Brahminical influence is seen to be widespread. People belonging to higher castes take their seats in the *natmandir* whereas the lower caste people find their place on the open field adjacent to the place of *Yajna*. After completion of the *Yajna*, the Brahmin priest arranges for dedicating the he-goats and he-sheep to be sacrificed before the deity. People belonging to all castes and communities approach the Brahmin priest in front of the *Yajna Kunda* with their he-goats and he-sheep and ask for his service for dedication. The official sacrificer who is a relative of the Brahmin priest becomes ready by this time and stands up in front of the wooden frame for immolation. He then starts sacrificing the animals one by one; his assistants become very busy to collect the chopped off heads together with the left hind legs of the animals thus sacrificed.

With the completion of animal sacrifice the Brahminic way of propitiation comes to an end and the non-sanskritic activities of the *Bhaktiyas* then dominate. The playing with *bhanral* by the *Bhaktiyas* is characterized by many non-Vedic features and modes of behaviour. Before starting for bringing *bhanral* the *mul-Bhaktiya* asks for formal permission of Dharmaraj by placing a lotus on his head. If this flower falls down without any external physical force, it is taken for granted that Dharmaraj has given permission to perform the ceremony of bringing and playing with *bhanral*. The extensive use of country-made

liquor in the village liquor booth predominates the whole situation. The *Bhaktyas* start from the temple of Dharmaraj with small earthen pots on their heads to bring *bhanral* from a particular place. The *mul-Bhaktya* leads the procession with a big earthen pitcher on his head. A large number of drummers accompany the procession and at the time of proceeding toward the prescribed place for bringing *bhanral* they show different feats of music which is considered as essential in bringing spiritual atmosphere. The earthen pitchers are filled up with *hanria* or rice beer at the shrine of Bagh Roy situated at the eastern corner of the village. The proprietor of the village liquor booth arranges to send specially prepared *hanria* to the shrine of Bagh Roy where the pitchers from *Bhaktyas* are collected and filled up with *hanria*. The *Bhaktyas* praise in the name of Bagh Roy in a voice and the drummers are requested to beat their drums without any break. In addition to the *Bhaktyas* a large number of men and women participate in bringing *bhanral* from the shrine of Bagh Roy to the temple of Dharmaraj. They observe day-long fast and maintain other allied restrictions. The higher caste people do not like to fill in their pots with *hanria*. The place of *hanria* is taken up by milk. Therefore, it is seen that there are two pitchers at the shrine of Bagh Roy—one with *hanria* and the other with milk. It is customary to pay 10 to 25 paise to the man who fills the pots with *hanria*. Sometimes rice is also given in place of cash payment.

After the filling up of the pitchers either with *hanria* or with milk the *mul-Bhaktya* is taken in front of the large group of *Bhaktyas* with *bhanral*. The drummers beat their drums as loudly as they can, the incense burners come forward with big censers and begin to create a smoky atmosphere by applying profuse incense to the fire. The accompanying crowd shouts abruptly in joy and merriment. The *Bhaktyas* with *bhanrals* on their heads begin to dance in a wild manner and proceed gradually towards the shrine of Dharmaraj. All the narrow village paths become overcrowded, people are always busy to get a chance to see the *bhanral* performance and enjoy it to their hearts content neglecting the scorching summer sun.

During night two important hair-raising feats are shown by the *Bhaktyas* who visit the Raghu's tank at the western corner of the village. At the advent of evening the *Bhaktyas* become

ready to start for the tank with *Baneswar* on shoulder. Every one of them takes specially prepared iron rod, few lotuses and a garland of *gulancha* flower. The embankments of the tank in question become crowded by the spectators long before coming of the *Bhaktyas*. The attending people coming from far off villages observe the feats with tremor and anxiety. At first one of the *Bhaktyas* receives *navratna ban*^s in which two sides of the abdomen are pierced by two iron rods—one centimetre in diameter and about one metre in length. The two ends of the rods from each side are then tied together in front and a torch is lit with the help of rags and kerosene oil. The head of the *Bhaktyas* is decorated with an iron incense burner which is provided with a flambeau. The whole operation is conducted by the village blacksmith named Sibu Karmakar. The blacksmith receives Rs. 2.00 and a napkin for implanting *navratna ban* on the body of the *Bhaktya*. The latter arranges the payment personally. By this time the large number of *Bhaktyas* who have brought with them one iron rod of similar nature and smeared with ghee become ready. The attending blacksmith attends everyone of them and pulls out the tongue by his left hand while the right hand is applied to pierce the tongue with the rod. The two ends of the rod are sometimes decorated with lotus. This is known as *jivban*. It takes at least three hours to complete with the piercing of *bans*. The payment for piercing *jivbans* ranges from 25 to 50 paise per head. All the *Bhaktyas* with *jivban* then stand up in a queue with the *Bhaktya* holding *navratna ban* in front and begin to dance through the village path. The drummers beat their drums in a wild manner, the spectators engulf the two sides of the village path—the still hours of night in remote village becomes turbulent. The *navratna ban* and the *jivban*, with their primitive characteristic features, are the principal items of an attempt to satisfy the deity through physical penances. This village is still maintaining the tradition in the strict sense of the term, and really one would be perplexed to find the creation of a horrible atmosphere through the continuous dance of the *Bhaktyas* pierced with *ban* or iron rods. There is no blood shedding and the villagers claim that no case of mishap has ever happened in the long history of the festival. The procession of the *Bhaktyas* with different kinds of *bans* wander about all the important paths of this big village and it

takes three to four hours to reach the temple of Dharmaraj. On reaching there the *Bhaktyas* stand up for some time with folded hands before the deity as if they are showing him their distress-based activities. Then the *bans* are released by a sudden push. The relatives from the houses of the *Bhaktyas* come forward with palm leaf fans to give them some relief from the troubles they have taken. The *Bhaktyas* are then asked to sit down on the ground in a row before the shrine of Dharmaraj. The priest then comes out of the shrine and walks over the shoulders of the *Bhaktyas* with the help of his two assistants for maintaining balance. This ceremony is known as *Jangal*.⁹

The *chadak* is held on next day. It is the auspicious day for the people of Metela and surrounding region. There is a belief that Dharmaraj comes down to the embankment of the tank where the *chadak* tree is implanted. It is also the day of dreaded activities, everybody feels for the *Bhaktyas* who are to go through the severe strenuous performances. Throughout the day the villagers belonging to all age-groups ask for the mercy of Dharmaraj to overcome the delicate situation. The *chadak* or hook-swinging ceremony is characterized by tremendous activities and though the practice has become obsolete in other parts of the country, it has been continuing at Metela village with all its heart-rending devices as in the remote past periods. As a last item of this folk festival the *chadak* is held in the midst of a mixed atmosphere of frightfulness and enjoyment conditioned by time-long devotion to the deity.

On the next morning the *chadak* tree is uprooted and it is placed horizontally on the ground. It requires a joint effort by a large number of *Bhaktyas*. The Brahmin priest performs worship for a short duration. Villagers reach the embankment of the tank for showing due regard to the *chadak* tree. It is then thrown to the water of the tank. As soon as it is immersed in the tank attending men, women and children take some quantity of water to sprinkle over their heads.

The *Baneswar* is then taken out from the altar of Bhairab and is carried by the *Bhaktyas* in a procession to the former tank where *Baneswar* has taken his bath. The *mul-Bhaktya* organises a worship of the *Baneswar*. Vermilion suspended in mustard oil is put on the wooden slab. All the *Bhaktyas* are then asked to take ceremonial departure from the god for the time being and

to pray for keeping in good health so that they may be able to participate in the ceremony next year. After this the *Bhaktiyas* ceremonially terminate the observance of rite by putting off sacred threads and placing these on the *Baneswar*.

Cult of Dharmaraj at Ekabbarpur

Dharmaraj of Ekabbarpur is worshipped in a very elaborate way though now-a-days the gorgeousness of the festival has been diminished to some extent. The annual festival, which is observed on the *Vaisakhi Purnima*, is organised by different castes and communities of the village with the help of other persons from neighbouring villages. At least one month before the festival a formal meeting is held in the drawing room of Sri Bhakti Bhusan Mondal, the official organizer of the festival. The whole ceremony is observed under his leadership and in this meeting he deputes a few persons to perform various activities. Sri Mondal's family is regarded as the initiator of the worship of Dharmaraj at Ekabbarpur in the remote past period. His forefathers used to act as the *Deyashis* of the deity. In course of time Dharmaraj became the common village deity and the responsibility of his worship came down to the villagers. The expenditures in relation to the annual festival are met out of subscriptions and donations from the villagers. Subscriptions are collected at the rate of ten seers of paddy per *hal* and Re. 1.00 in cash. Those who have got no landed property are asked to pay the subscriptions in cash. The amount of subscriptions varies according to the financial condition of the persons concerned.

Being a small village Ekabbarpur does not find it difficult to unite readily under the same roof for the quick execution of work. The information regarding the observance of the festival of Dharmaraj is ceremonially sent to the different corners of the village through the beating of drums by the traditional Dom drummers of this village. The Brahmin priest of the deity performs a ceremony three days before the actual festival to initiate the annual worship. The priest, in presence of influential villagers, asks ceremonial permission of Dharmaraj to observe his worship through various stages. The ceremonial worship is promised to be made on behalf of the villagers irrespective of castes, classes and communities. It is the tradition of the village to neglect all the barriers of rich and poor, clean and unclean

castes in respect of annual festival of Dharmaraj. The villagers who want to be *Bhaktyas* gather in front of the shrine. The priest asks the man who is going to take the responsibility of *mul-Bhaktya* for carrying the *Baneswar* to the tank at the eastern side of the village. The barber belonging to Tantipara village officiates at the ceremonial initiation of the *Bhaktyas*. He leads the procession from the shrine to the tank where the *Baneswar* is placed on an elevated earthen platform. All the *Bhaktyas* undergo ceremonial shaving by the barber and his assistants. But the persons belonging to Bauri, Dom and Muchi castes are not allowed to get the service of the officiating barber. They shave each other. The barber demands a new napkin from the persons who initiate for the first time and from others his remuneration ranges from 10 to 25 paise per head. When shavings are completed, the *mul-Bhaktya*, in association with his fellow-members, takes out the *Baneswar* and goes to the knee-deep water. Then the *Baneswar* is dipped in water for three times. The drummers beat their drums vigorously. The childless women jump in the water without any hesitation to avail the opportunity of getting the drops of bathing water from the *Baneswar*. The *Baneswar* is then carried to the elevated platform. The Brahmin priest applies vermilion added with oil on the wooden plank of *Baneswar* and worships him for a short duration. He offers sacred thread to the *Baneswar* first and afterwards all the *Bhaktyas* are supplied with a piece of sacred thread to wear round their necks. The priest also performs a ceremony for changing the *goiras* of the *Bhaktyas*. The *Bhaktyas* lead restricted life from the beginning to the end of the ceremony. There is a strong belief that if any *Bhaktya* purposely violates the rules and regulations, he would be punished in due course. The villagers point out many incidences of misfortune caused due to the violation of customary rules imposed in the life of the *Bhaktyas*. The *Baneswar* is carried back to the shrine by the *Bhaktyas* and it is placed outside the shrine of Dharmaraj. All the *Bhaktyas* praise loudly in the name of Dharmaraj of different places including their own village.

On the first day of worship the *Baneswar* is carried on the shoulders of the *Bhaktyas* to have a round through the village. The villagers belonging to different age-groups come out of their homes to show due regard to *Baneswar*. The *Bhaktyas* collect rice, vegetables, mustard oil and a few coins from each and

every household. But there is no compulsion in it. There are some persons who invite the *Baneswar* to their houses and he is placed beside the altar for sacred basil plant (*Ocimum sanctum*). These vermilion and mustard oil are offered to the *Baneswar*. Some persons collect vermilion from the wooden plank of *Baneswar* to treat their sterile plants with it. Their is a belief that the particular vermilion has got a fertile effect and if it is applied on the roots and stems of sterile fruit plants, these would bear fruits in abundance. After making round through the different corners of the village the *Baneswar* is placed at his original place. In the evening all the *Bhaktyas* take bath and then smear oil on the feet of Brahmin priest and offer *pranami* to him.

The worship of Dharmaraj starts at about 12 noon by the Brahmin priest belonging to Bakreswar village. *Mul-Bhaktya* helps the priest in all respects during the different phases of worship. Dharmaraj slab is bathed in water taken from the *Swetganga*¹⁰ in Bakreswar temple complex. In the meantime, offerings in the form of sun-dried rice, parboiled rice, wafer of molasses, vermilion, betel and betel-nut together with a few coins begin to reach the shrines from the different households of the village. Milk is also offered by many devotees which is collected in a large brass-made basin. During worship 108 white lotuses are offered to Dharmaraj on behalf of the village. In addition to it a white he-goat is given to the deity which is sacrificed at the end of worship. The goat is dedicated to Dharmaraj during his worship. The *Yajna* is held at the courtyard of the shrine when fully sanskritized procedures are adopted in presence of distinguished higher caste people. The *Bhaktyas* also do not get any opportunity to take active part in the *Yajna* performance. The village astrologer, Sri Mahadeb Chakravarty, takes his seat by the side of the sacred fire. The priest and other Brahmin associates encircle the place of *Yajna*. People belonging to lower castes stay away from the *Yajna* performance but they observe the whole affair with devotion. The *Yajna tilak* is prepared by the priest with the help of extinguished burnt charcoal by applying curd and then rubbing it in ghee. The priest puts a mark with this black paste on the forehead of every Brahmin attending the ceremony. It is then given over to the *mul-Bhaktya* who gives impressions on the foreheads of all other

persons. The priest then offers *bhog* of sweet rice-porridge to Dharmaraj. It is followed by animal sacrifice by the official sacrificer who is a Brahmin by caste. Suddenly the drummers begin to beat their drums vigorously. All people rush to the site of animal sacrifice to have a look into the performance. First of all, the white goat solely dedicated to Dharmaraj is sacrificed and kept by the side of the immolation stand. Then the devotees come forward with their dedicated he-goats or he-sheep to official sacrificer who sacrifices these one by one with the help of a sharp sword. Two persons remain busy all the time in collecting the chopped off heads and one of the hind legs detached from the sacrificed animals. This ceremony ends with the distribution of *prasad* to the attending persons. The *Bhaktyas* take the responsibility relating to the distribution of *prasad*.

In the meantime the *Bhaktyas* become ready for the next phase of the festival. They start for bringing *bhanral* after bowing down before Dharmaraj. The *Bhaktyas* propitiate the *chadak-tala*, an open space in front of the shrine, in the previous night with the help of lotus, *bel* leaves and the burning of incense. All of them loudly praise in the name of Dharmaraj. It is known as the "awakening of *bhanral*". Similarly, they go to the village liquor booth on the night before the ceremonial bringing of *bhanral* for formal invitation. The owner of the liquor booth receives a token payment of two seers of parboiled rice, a few vegetables available during this time, vermilion, one betel and a betel-nut together with a few coins. It is nothing but a medium of showing respect to the owner of the liquor booth. Every one of the *Bhaktyas* takes *bhanr* or earthen pot which is generally purchased from the *hat* of Tantipara. The *mul-Bhaktya* takes a big pot and leads the procession. On reaching the liquor booth they stand on a specially cleaned open courtyard. A few big pitcherfuls of *hanria* are kept at this site beforehand. The *Bhaktyas* praise aloud in the name of Dharmaraj of Ekabbarpur and other adjoining villages to help them in carrying *bhanral* without any difficulty. The *mul-Bhaktya* puts his *bhanr* on the ground when the owner of the liquor booth pours *hanria* in it. It is followed by the filling up of the *bhanrs* of other *Bhaktyas* and in this other workers of the liquor booth take part. Then all of the *Bhaktyas* proceed towards the shrine of Dharmaraj forming a line. The incessant beating of the drums, constant

hullar baloo of the attending men, women and children, profuse incense burning make the whole situation strange as well as enjoyable. While going to the shrine of Dharmaraj the *Bhaktiyas* begin to be "possessed" by the deity. Suddenly the "possessed" *Bhaktiya* becomes senseless and falls down on the ground. He is then taken up by the attending visitors and carried to the shrine. The "possessed" *Bhaktiya* sometimes throws out his hands and feet in such a force that it requires 4 or 5 persons to hold him. When the procession reaches the shrine the pots of *hanria* carried by the *Bhaktiyas* are placed outside the door of the shrine and the "possessed" *Bhaktiya* is laid down in the courtyard. Those, who have not been possessed, bow down before the deity. It is believed that the deity does not appear in them as they have, consciously or unconsciously, violated the basic restrictions to be observed by the active participants of Dharmaraj.

The *chadak* is not held here. In the remote past period the *chadak* performance was an attractive feat of the Dharma worship of Ekabbarpur. But in course of time it has been completely abolished. According to villagers, when the then British Government took stern attitude to stop physical penances in the religious festivals, the hook-swinging activities at Ekabbarpur stopped once for all. There is a deity in the shrine of Dharmaraj who is known by the term '*Chadak Thakur*' reflecting the existence of *chadak* performance in the days gone by. In the evening a few thrilling feats like jumping on the thorned twigs and walking on fire take place. The *Bhaktiyas* ceremonially awake the twigs of prickly nightshade in the vast open field at the eastern part of the village. This is done without the knowledge of any other persons besides the *Bhaktiyas*. A few hours before the actual performance, i.e., *kanta-jhap* the *Bhaktiyas* go to particular place and praise in the name of Dharmaraj. Then the "awakened" twigs are uprooted with force and brought to the shrine through a dancing procession of the *Bhaktiyas* accompanied by the beating of drums. These are placed in the courtyard of the shrine and *Bhaktiyas* start somersaulting on the prickly twigs in presence of a large gathering. During lying down of the *Bhaktiya* on the thorns, the Brahmin priest sometimes stands on the body of the former placing his feet on the chest of the *Bhaktiya*. This ceremony is followed by walking on fire. The *mul-Bhaktiya* prepares fire with the help of dried branches

of acacia collected by the *Bhaktyas* themselves. When the fire becomes strong, the flame is extinguished and the burning charcoals are spread over the ground. The *Bhaktyas* then are asked to walk on the fire after praising loudly in the name of Dharmaraj. On passing over the fire the *Bhaktya* concerned sits down on a platform when his feet are examined by the *mul-Bhaktya*. If there is any sign of burning of the sole, it would be presumed that the *Bhaktya* concerned has distracted from the prescribed path of observance of the ceremony. This performance rouses much interest amongst the public.

On the next morning the *Bhaktyas* carry the Baneswar to the tank at the eastern side of the village. They are accompanied by the Brahmin priest. The drummers play on their drums on the embankment of the tank. A short ceremony is held by the priest to bathe and worship the Baneswar attended by the *Bhaktyas*. Everything is ended when the *Bhaktyas* put off their sacred threads and offer these to the Baneswar. The *mul-Bhaktya* offers all other *Bhaktyas* some quantity of soaked rice and molasses to eat and thereby declares the termination of the week-long ceremony.

Cult of Dharmaraj Worship at Tentulbandh

Tentulbandh village as a whole observes the annual festival of Dharmaraj in a dignified way. During the different days of the annual festival, which takes place on the full-moon day in the month of *Vaisakh* (April-May), people belonging to different castes and communities enjoy with full satisfaction. The small village with nearly 250 persons in all becomes overflowed with numerous people on the days of festival. People coming from different villages in the neighbouring region feel themselves as a part and parcel of the village festival at Tentulbandh. There is a formal *puja* committee which is constituted by seven members. But at the present moment it is a defunct body and all responsibilities in respect of worship of Dharmaraj have fallen on a Sadgop gentleman, Sri Binoy Mondal. A few years ago when the traditional *puja* committee became indifferent for organizing the annual festival which resulted due to the inactivity of the members, Sri Mondal came forward to shoulder the responsibilities of the festival concerned. He is a very religious-minded man and some form of social service mentality works in him.

Sri Mondal, with the help of his enthusiastic fellow-villagers manages the whole situation from beginning to end. Guided by Sri Binoy Mondal a group of persons from the three communities in the village collect subscriptions as per ability of the villagers. Those, who possess good amount of cultivable land, generally pay inflated amount mostly in kinds.

The traditional Dom musician starts beating his drum ceremonially seven days before the actual worship. He is to play on drum every morning and evening regularly. It automatically communicates the news of ensuing annual festival of Dharmaraj to the villagers. On the third day before the actual worship the Brahmin priest of the deity installs the *ghot* ceremonially on the altar of Dharmaraj. This ceremony is attended by most of the villagers to pay deep regard to their tutelary deity of the village. The actual ceremony starts with the shaving of the *Bhaktyas* by the traditional barber, who comes from Parasiya village. The persons, who want to become *Bhaktyas*, assemble at the temple premises in the morning — one day before the actual worship — and wait for the service of the barber. Many persons come from the neighbouring villages like Parasiya, Muktipur, Gaisara, Khayradihi, Dedoha, etc., to initiate themselves as *Bhaktyas*. In the meantime, the barber reaches the temple and with the beating of drum all of them start for the tank at the northern side of the village. The barber shaves all the persons excluding those belonging to Dom, Bauri and Muchi communities. He claims 25 paise per head as his remuneration. After shaving is completed, whether it is conducted by the barber or by themselves, the Brahmin priest offers sacred thread to all of them after changing their original *gotras*. Then they come back to the temple and maintain secluded life from their respective families. They are to follow restricted life as is generally imposed on the behaviour-pattern of the *Bhaktyas*.

The *Banam* is held after a few hours when the Baneswar is brought out by the *mul-Bhaktya* from the temple which has been kept ready by the carpenter of Parasiya village on the traditional payment of two seers of rice. The ceremonial bath of Baneswar is conducted by the Brahmin priest with the help of the *Bhaktyas* when a large gathering celebrates the pious moment with due regard. The *Bhaktyas* praise in the name of Dharmaraj repeatedly and carefully manage the crowd for

collecting drops of bathing water from the body of Baneswar. It is a most opportune moment on the part of the sterile women to make an attempt for warding off sterility.

On coming back to the temple the *mul-Bhaktya* places the *Baneswar* by the side of the altar of Dharmaraj. All the *Bhaktyas* then sit down side by side at the temple door when the Brahmin priest enters the temple by walking over the shoulders of the *Bhaktyas*. In this the *mul-Bhaktya* assists the Brahmin priest, who on entering into the temple, performs the worship of Baneswar for a short time. The *Bhaktyas* praise in the name of Dharmaraj and go out with the *Baneswar* for having a round through the village paths. The travel of *Baneswar* inside the village is regarded to have a beneficial effect because of the fact that the *Baneswar* is considered as a symbol of fertility. Not only so, *Baneswar* is taken as the living embodiment of welfare of man, animals and plants. During travel the *Baneswar* is placed at the three places popularly known as the shrine of benevolent deities. People belonging to the different castes gather at these places and offer rice, vegetables, milk, sweets, etc. Sometimes new napkins and cloths are also presented in the name of Baneswar.

On the night before the actual worship the *Bhaktyas* go to the nearabout forest at the northern side of the village to invoke the *kadam* tree (*Anthocephalus cadamba*) for getting a flower to be offered in the sacred fire. The bushes of prickly night-shades are also ceremonially "awaken" during the time. No other persons excepting the *Bhaktyas* are allowed to accompany the team of invocation. After returning from the forest the *Bhaktyas* approach Dharmaraj in the temple and pray before him for the smooth running of the different spheres of activities connected with the festival. The group of drummers then present their musical feats which change the whole surroundings and attract large number of men, women and children to the temple site.

The worship of Dharmaraj of this shrine commences in the morning at about 11 A.M. when large number of female devotees from different villages come with offerings which consist of rice, sweets, vermilion, betel and betel-nuts. It is customary to dedicate burnt clay horses to Dharmaraj. Within a few hours it would be seen that large heap of clay horses have been

deposited by the side of the altar of Dharmaraj. The worship is conducted by the Brahmin priest of the deity with the help of his two assistants. The ceremonial bath of Dharma slab is performed with unboiled milk supplied by a white coloured cow belonging to one Sadgop family of the village. The worship is conducted in a purely sanskritized way though there are a few primitive features in it. After worship of the deity the *Yajna* is held in front of the altar. It is performed in an orthodox way; the Brahminical procedures are strictly observed. A dominance of the Brahmin and other higher caste groups is categorically observed during *Yajna* performance. When the *Yajna* performance goes on in full swing, the *Bhaktyas* start for the forest with the drummers to bring the *kadam* flower from the tree previously invoked by them. On reaching the base of the tree the drummers begin to beat their drums tremendously, the *Bhaktyas* start praising in the name of Dharmaraj. Suddenly one of the *Bhaktyas* climbs upon the tree and plucks the much awaited and celebrated flower. It is brought to the place of *Yajna* with due respect. All people rush to him to have a look at the flower which is finally given over to the priest for offering homage to the sacred fire. At the end of the ceremony the *Yajna tilak* is prepared by the Brahmin priest and he, first of all, puts marks on the foreheads of the attending Brahmins. Then the *Bhaktyas* offer *Yajna tilak* to other persons. It is followed by the distribution of *prasad* consisting of fruits, sugarcane pieces and wafers of molasses by the *mul-Bhaktya*. A large number of he-goats and he-sheep are sacrificed before Dharmaraj. On the prescribed day of worship it is seen that groups of men, women and children are coming to this village through the narrow paths over the paddy fields holding the strings tied round the neck of the he-sheep or he-goats. These people have taken vows before the deity for animal sacrifice to fulfil their particular desires. The official sacrificer belongs to Parasiya village and he is a Brahmin by caste. After sacrificing the animals the chopped off heads and one of the hind legs are kept aside. People belonging to different age-groups gather round the immolation stand to observe the sacrificing activities conducted by the official sacrificer. The drummers are continuously busy to beat their drums at particular time and situation.

The *bhanral* ceremony is held and as there is no liquor

booth in this village the *Bhaktyas* are to bring *bhanral* from Tantipara. All the prescribed procedures are followed on the previous day. On reaching the liquor booth with empty earthen pots the *Bhaktyas* ask the owner of the booth to fill their pots with *hanria*. He receives 50 paise from each of the *Bhaktyas* for offering *hanria* in the pots. They praise loudly in the name of Dharmaraj and start dancing on one leg surrounding the pots of *hanria*. After this all of them bow down before the pots and these are placed on the heads with due devotion. It is believed that Dharmaraj himself takes shelter in these *bhanral* and the *Bhaktyas* concerned become 'possessed' by him while going towards the shrine of Dharmaraj in a procession. The beating of drums, burning of profuse incense and fussing noisily of the spectators create a mysterious atmosphere. While going to the shrine the *Bhaktyas* become 'possessed' one by one and begin to fall down on the ground. The 'possessed' *Bhaktyas* start throwing arms and legs to and fro in a vigorous manner when they are picked up by their relatives and brought to the shrine carrying on their shoulders. The *bhanrs* are collected and are placed at a place outside the temple of Dharmaraj. All the *Bhaktyas*, 'possessed' or unpossessed, then bow down before Dharmaraj and pray for his mercy in all walks of their life. The *mul-Bhaktya* lies down before the altar of Dharmaraj with the earnest appeal to save men, animals and plants of the locality from all sorts of disaster. The Brahmin priest then comes out with a pot of *santijal*¹¹ (celebrated water of peace) and with the help of a petal of a white lotus the water is sprinkled over the *Bhaktyas*.

The night time is specially meant for presenting various feats by the *Bhaktyas*. In the evening the *Bhaktyas* accompanied by the drummers go to the forest to uproot the prickly nightshade plants. The *Bhaktyas* begin to dance vigorously taking the plants in question in their hands. In this dancing mood and accompanied by the drummers they proceed to the village and have a round through the village paths. Finally, they come to the shrine where by placing the plants in an open courtyard they begin to jump over these. Then fire is lit before the altar of Dharmaraj with the help of dried pieces of wood collected from the jungle. The *Bhaktyas* praise in the name of Dharmaraj and then start dancing over the fire in a whirling manner.

'Dolan Sewa' is another important feat of the *Bhaktyas* here. A wooden stand is erected in which there are two vertical poles and over which a horizontal pole is fitted. On the horizontal pole two string-made loops hang. There is a fire-pit in front of the stand in which fire is lit. The *Bhaktyas* then come one by one and with the help of others they introduce two feet into the string noose and hang upside-down. The body begins to oscillate and in this condition he is supplied with flowers in his hands to throw these into the fire with proper reverence. The visitors coming from distant places pass the whole night merrily.

In the morning the *nul-Bhaktya* instructs his colleagues to start for the prescribed tank with the *Baneswar*. The priest and the barber accompany them. On reaching the *ghat* of the tank a short ceremony is performed when the *Bhaktyas* are asked to put off the sacred threads and thereby return to their normal life. A grand feast is arranged at the temple premises in which all the *Bhaktyas* enjoy to their hearts' content.

Cult of Dharmaraj at Lakshindarpur

Lakshindarpur is the smallest of all the villages studied in this treatise. But during the annual festival of Dharmaraj of this village with less than 200 population a worth-mentioning change is noticed. The whole locality surrounding Lakshindarpur village becomes overjoyed with festivities centering round the worship of Dharmaraj on the full-moon day in the month of *Vaisakh* (April-May). The whole affair of annual festival is conducted by the Sadgop *Deyashi* named Sri Narayan Mondal. Sri Mondal takes the help of other villagers specially those who are related to him through agricultural activities. There is no formal committee or any other public body; Sri Mondal takes all the responsibilities of the annual festival as the traditional *Deyashi*. There are 18 bighas of landed property in the name of the deity and from the earnings of which a greater portion of expenditures is met with. Moreover, the *Deyashi* earns some amount of money regularly in the treatment of bone fractures and other osteological diseases with the application of divinely graced medicine. He spends a considerable portion of it in the befitting observance of the festival of Dharmaraj.

At least seven days before the *Vaisakhi Purnima* Sri Mondal

ceremonially invites the Brahmin priest living in Chora village. He also sends invitation to the different persons belonging to the neighbouring villages who generally dedicate themselves as ascetics in the festival. The day before the actual worship is known as *bar* when the *ghot* is placed at the shrine. An earthen pitcher is filled up with water and a twig of mango is planted at the mouth of the pitcher. The body of the pitcher is marked with vermilion mixed with mustard oil. The *ghot* is brought by the *Deyashi* from the nearabout tank and is ceremonially set up at the foot of the tamarind tree where Dharmaraj is believed to reside. The Brahmin priest then comes to the shrine and he places another *ghot* by its side and worships the two for a short while. This indicates the ceremonial starting of the annual festival of Dharmaraj. In the same morning the *Bhaktyas* go to the nearabout tank with *Baneswar* and perform ceremonial shaving by the barber coming from Barhmohule village. The barber is paid instantaneously by the *Bhaktyas*—it ranges from 25 paise to 50 paise. The barber sometimes demands a new napkin from the *Bhaktya* who shaves for the first time. All the higher caste men are served by the barber but the persons belonging to the lower section of the community shave each other themselves. The Brahmin priest offers sacred thread to the *mul-Bhaktya*, first of all, who then goes through a short initiation ceremony and thereby becomes an ascetic of the deity. He then offers sacred threads to the other *Bhaktyas* when the priest recites hymns in front of the *Bhaktyas*. Then the *Baneswar* is ceremonially bathed in the water of the tank which is conducted by the *mul-Bhaktya* with the help of his fellow *Bhaktyas*. In the meantime, the priest gets ready to worship the *Baneswar* at the *ghat* of the tank. All the attending persons bow down before *Baneswar* and pray for his kindness. From now on the *Bhaktyas* follow the traditional restrictions in their day-to-day life and activities. They are not allowed to maintain any familial connection. They are recognized as a group of ascetics for the cause of religious festival of the region. With due respect the *Baneswar* is carried back to the shrine when all the *Bhaktyas* make round for nine times encircling the *Baneswar* and Dharmaraj.

On the *Purnima* the *Bhaktyas* assemble at the shrine, and

praise loudly in the name of Dharmaraj. Then they go round the shrine again for nine times and after which take up the *Baneswar* on shoulders to start for travelling through the village paths. They also visit the neighbouring villages specially from where persons come to initiate as *Bhaktyas*. During the visit the *Bhaktyas* collect rice, vegetables, pulses, sweet, betel, betel-nuts, vermilion, mustard oil from the different households. The belief in the fertility effect in the body of *Baneswar* is deeply prevalent amongst the people of the locality and there are occasions when the villagers ceremonially invite the *Baneswar* to treat the sterile plants in the courtyards or in the gardens. The bathing water of *Baneswar* is poured at the root of the sterile trees or vermilion taken from the wooden slab of *Baneswar* is applied at the root of the tree. They come back by 12 noon and after this arrange for worship of Dharmaraj.

The Brahmin priest, first of all, arranges for bath of the Dharma slab with the help of water of his brass pot. His assistant receives all the offerings in the form of rice, fruits, sweets, etc., from the different households. *Deyashi* arranges for 20 seers of flattened rice, molasses and 5 seers of milk for *bhog*. The worship of the deity is followed by *Yajna* in which the astrologer from Barmahma village takes active part. He arranges for necessary materials to be offered on the sacred fire. *Deyashi* gives one seer of cow ghee for the purpose of offering it to the fire as per procedure. The wooden faggots of the *Yajna* are supplied by a *sutradhar* family at Koridhya village. As in other places the *Yajna* is performed here in a strict Brahminical procedure. At the end of the ceremony the priest offers *Yajna tilak* to the Brahmins first and then to other non-Brahmin visitors. The persons belonging to the lower caste communities are not allowed to get *Yajna tilak*. The priest utters hymns and sprinkles over *santijal* on the heads of the assembled persons. During this time all persons come forward and receive *santijal* without any discrimination. *Deyashi* offers *prasad* to the people attending the ceremony at the shrine. A large number of goats and sheep are sacrificed before the deity. First of all, the goat dedicated by the *Deyashi* is sacrificed which is organized by the assistant of the priest. Then the goats or sheep brought by the devotees are sacrificed one after

another. A large number of benefited patients of bone fractures and other osteological diseases come to the shrine with profound gratitude and most of the time they are tempted to offer goats or sheep for sacrifice before the deity. All the chopped off heads and one of the hind legs of the sacrificed animals are collected by the assistants of the sacrificer and these are placed in heaps beside the shrine. In the night a grand feast is held, known as *Bhaktiya-bhojan*,¹² where these are cooked and served.

The *Bhaktiyas* then start for the liquor booth in Koridhya village at about 2 P.M. On completion of worship the *Bhaktiyas* stand in a line before the shrine and loudly praise in the name of Dharmaraj. The drummers, belonging to the Dom community of this village, beat their drums incessantly at this time. The priest comes down from the shrine and sprinkles *santijal* on the *Bhaktiyas* and then proceeds to the *mul-Bhaktiya* to offer him the blessings of the god and a small earthen pot filled with paddy and two betel-nuts. The other *Bhaktiyas* are also given small types of pots similarly filled with paddy and betel-nuts. The women *Bhaktiyas* are also allowed to accompany the males provided they observe all the formalities mentioned above. All the *Bhaktiyas* then proceed towards the liquor booth where, according to tradition, the shop-owner has prepared a special pitcher of rice-beer to serve them. The *Bhaktiyas* reaching the compound of the shop, begin to call Dharmaraj loudly when the shop-owner comes out with the pot-full of rice-beer and places it on a clean spot specially prepared for this purpose. The *Bhaktiyas* then encircle him and wait for the distribution of the rice-beer. The paddy and betel-nuts are then poured on a cloth spread out by the shop-keeper. The empty pots are filled up to the brim with rice-beer. The *Bhaktiyas* go round the filled-up pots thrice, and then the *mul-Bhaktiya*, first of all, picks up his pot on the head. Other *Bhaktiyas* follow him similarly. All the *Bhaktiyas* with their pots on the head then proceed towards the shrine. They are accompanied by a large crowd and the drummers, whose non-stop beating of drums maintains the spirit and tempo of the festival. The *Bhaktiyas* begin to dance on the way to the shrine and ultimately they go into a trance, being 'possessed' by the deity. In that condition they start running to the shrine

where they fall down quite senseless. When the *Bhaktyas* are 'possessed', people come to them to ask questions on various affairs. It is believed that Dharmaraj himself, during this time, gives the replies through the *Bhaktyas*.

The *chaduk* is not performed here and no *ban* is pierced on the body of the *Bhaktyas*. But the feats like *Kanta-jhamp* and *phul khela* are held in a befitting manner when a large gathering hits the shrine with a view to observe the brave activities of the *Bhaktyas*. The feat of playing with fire is a very skilful performance and in it a well-organized supervision is needed. The large fire-place is lit with heaps of dry wooden faggots supplied by the *Deyashi*. The *mul-Bhaktya* prepares the furnace and he also kindles fire which starts burning blazingly in no time. The *Bhaktyas* loudly praise in the name of Dharmaraj, the *Deyashi* bows down before the fire and the priest sprinkles charm-oriented water at one side of the fire-place. The *Bhaktyas* select leader of the group from amongst themselves who readily enters into the blazed fire and starts throwing fire to and fro. Other *Bhaktyas* follow him and act accordingly. In a moment the whole atmosphere takes the pleasant scene of firework. The *Bhaktyas* are cordially appreciated by the attending public for the skilful feats displayed by them. After the feats are over the *Bhaktyas* rotate in a dancing style centering round the shrine of Dharmaraj. The drummers follow them with the rhythmic beating of their drums. The *Bhaktyas* then drink the bathing water of Dharmaraj and thereby break their fasting.

At the closing phase of the ceremony the *Bhaktyas* assemble at the shrine and take out the *Baneswar* to the prescribed tank. They are accompanied by the *Deyashi* and the priest. The *Baneswar* is placed at the *ghat* and after a short-term worship he is taken to the middle of the tank. The *Bhaktyas* jointly submerge the *Baneswar* temporarily in water and all of them take bath in the said tank. The priest then requests them to put off their sacred threads and place these on the iron nails of *Baneswar*. The *Deyashi* offers the *Bhaktyas* molasses and rice soaked in water on the eve of putting off the sacred threads to terminate their ascetic life. Everybody, present there, bows down before the *Baneswar* in profound respect. The drummers play on drums without any break; all of the

Bhaktiyas and other allied persons come back to the shrine to show Dharmaraj due regard and thereby to inform him that everything has been ended peacefully and successfully.

PERFORMANCES OF CHANDI WORSHIP

At Metela Village

The goddess Chandi at Metela village belongs exclusively to the Bauri community—a low-graded, jal-achal caste of rural Bengal. But the goddess in question is adored by all sections of the community spread over a vast region. The annual festival of Chandi, held on the third day of the Bengali month *Magh* (January-February), is characterized by pomp and eclat. A large number of men, women and children from the different villages of this locality gather here to participate in the ceremonial functions related to the deity's annual worship. The shrine is cleared and smeared with cowdung paste. The womenfolk of the community drew *alpana* based on various designs. The shrine at the base of a *pipal* tree (*Ficus religiosa*) is decorated with the hanging of small twigs of mango and *neem*. Also different types of flowers made out of coloured papers, and chains prepared from cutting red and blue papers are displayed throughout the whole area of the shrine. A canopy is rigged up over the shrine and the allied space to give the place a distinguished look. On the day of annual worship the *Deyashi* observes fasting until the performance of the day is completed. From morning a large number of devotees from distant places begin to arrive at the shrine with different types of offerings. At about 10 A.M. the villagers belonging to different castes and communities, come to the deity with the traditional offerings consisting of sun-dried rice, wafer of molasses, fruits, betel, betel-nuts and vermilion. The drummers belonging to the Dom community of this village attend the shrine from the early morning. They beat their drums vigorously at the different periods of the day when the *Deyashi* and his associates instruct them to do so. In addition to the traditional drummers of the deity the devotees specially who have been benefited by the grace of Chandi appoint their own drummers for beating of drums on the occasion. On hearing incessant drum-beat, men, women and children gradually come to the shrine. The *Deyashi*

and his associates are seen very much busy for the preparational activities of the ensuing worship. Those who come from the distant places and specially the *faridis*¹³ readily approach the *Deyashi* and take rest at the adjoining mud-built house.

The actual worship of Chandi starts after 12 noon when the *Deyashi* goes to the tank for taking a holy dip. He comes back within a few minutes and changes his clothes for a dry one. The assistant of the *Deyashi* supplies him a long trident. In the meantime, all the offered materials are heaped up before the deities—the *Mangal Chandi*, *Marak Chandi* and *Khyapa Ma*. The *Deyashi* then starts painting vermilion on the deities who have already been decorated with copper and silver ornaments presented by the devotees. The trident is also painted with vermilion suspended in mustard oil. The worship is made with the help of lotus and marigold. The *bel* leaves are also used. Some quantity of hemp is offered by the *Deyashi*.

The *Deyashi* sits on a grass mat to worship the deities. His two assistants sit at his side. There is neither any specialized *mantras* for worship nor any sanskritized procedure is followed. The whole affair of worship is conducted by the *Deyashi* himself. He wears a copper wristlet and his neck is provided with a bead necklace. These two items are considered as essential at the time of worshipping Chandi. The worship is performed in a low humming noise and then the *Deyashi* sits tightly with his folded hands before the deities for getting their permission to start animal sacrifice. In the meantime, a large number of goats and sheep have reached the shrine. Numerous devotees from the different corners have brought these for sacrifice and thereby to fulfil their promises made earlier. Generally vows are made before Chandi to supply a goat or sheep if any particular desire is fulfilled. On being successful in that particular field the vow-maker concerned approaches the deity with the goat or sheep on the day of annual festival. Sometimes pair of goats or sheep is promised for fulfilling a particular desire, of course it is of a bit complicated type. On getting divine permission to start animal sacrifice the *Deyashi* communicates the attending people. The drums begin to be sounded in rhythmic way, all the visitors start rejoicing. It is considered as a very auspicious moment not only for the vow-taker but for the whole village. If there is any irregularity in the promise made

by any devotee or any affair of disrespect is smelt in the presentation of the animal to be sacrificed, the goddess concerned abruptly refuses to accept any of the animals that are made ready for sacrifice. First of all, one goat and one sheep are sacrificed on behalf of the *Deyashi*. Just after sacrifice, the two chopped off heads of the animals are brought to the deities and blood is sprinkled over them. Most of the visitors come forward to put finger-marks on their foreheads with the help of blood of the sacrificed animal. Then the animals brought by the devotees and *faridis* are sacrificed, one after another, by one of the assistants of the *Deyashi*. They receive the chopped off heads and one of the hind legs of the sacrificed animal and the rest portions are left with the parties concerned. Hundreds of goats and sheep are sacrificed in this way, the surrounding area of the immolation stand becomes red with the rolled down blood of the sacrificed animals.

After at least one hour of continuous blowing of sword to sacrifice all the animals the sacrificer presents the blood-smeared sword before the deities. The *Deyashi* then takes his seat before Chandi when the drummers start continuous beating of their drums in a specially oriented way. The assistants of the *Deyashi* burn profuse incense in two large incensers and the *Deyashi* remains in deep concentration. Suddenly he begins to shiver his whole body and ultimately he starts jumping in sitting posture. The drummers get considerable enthusiasm by seeing this very state of affair and they become more active in the presentation of music. After a short while the *Deyashi* falls flat on the ground. The whole atmosphere becomes completely calm and quiet because it is the proper time to pray for the grace of the goddess herself. A tremendous gambolling is noticed amongst the devotees and *faridis* who are anxiously waiting for presentation of their problems to the deity through the 'possessed' *Deyashi*. The anomalous situation is readily managed by the assistants of the *Deyashi*. They bring the *faridis* and devotees concerned to the 'possessed' *Deyashi* one by one and help in communicating their problems and other essential information to him. The *Deyashi* receives all of them ceremonially and nods his head all the time as if he is forwarding the matter to the deity concerned.

This ends the worship of Chandi. The *Deyashi* then gets up

from his seat and bows down before the deity. He takes up the iron trident and goes to the attached mud-built house where he sits beside other deities like Manasa and Kali. It is the sanctified seat from where the *Deyashi* treats the *faridis* and gives suggestions and advices to the different devotees following an occult way.

At Khairadihi Village

The goddess Mangal Chandi at Khairadihi village is extensively worshipped and the ceremony is attended by large number of persons from distant places. The annual festival of the deity starts on the third Tuesday in the month of *Chaitra* (February-March). The Tentubaya *Deyashi* arranges for the ceremony and he shoulders all the expenditures in relation to the festival from his special fund created by the donations and *pranami* of the devotees and *faridis*. Seven days before the actual festival the *Deyashi* sends ceremonial invitations to the Brahmin priest at Parasiya village, to the barber at Tantipara village and to the *Deyashi* of Manasa deity at Tantipara and Lakshminarayanpur villages. In the meantime, the outer sides of the shrine are cleaned under the supervision of Kalicharan Bagdi of the village whether the inner sides are cleaned and whitewashed by the family members of the *Deyashi*. The *natmandir* is decorated with the twigs of mango tied with straw ropes. Long chains made of coloured papers are also displayed at the four sides of the *natmandir*. Clay models depicting different scenes of preaching religion by the religious prophets are seen to be exhibited on the top of the *natmandir*. The shrine of Mangal Chandi is specially cleaned and decorated with paper flowers and *chandmala*.

The village barber goes to Lakshminarayanpur seven days before actual date of worship to bring the Manasa deity to Khairadihi. He carries the deity on his head and the *sutradhar* holds umbrella over her head. The drummers beat the drums throughout the way. On reaching the village boundary the drummers begin to beat their drums very loudly. The Manasa is then descended at the shrine of Gaila Buri at the outskirts of the village where both the deities are worshipped by the Brahmin priest. There is no particular deity at the *than* of Gaila Buri. There is a raised platform where two clay horses are found. After worship is done, the Manasa and one of the clay

horses as the representative of Gaila Buri are brought to the shrine of Mangal Chandi. On reaching the gate of the shrine these deities are ceremonially received by the womenfolk of the *Deyashi* family with *purnaghot*¹⁴ associated with the blowing of conch shells. One of the women makes water line by gradual pouring of water on the ground from a vessel. This water line is followed by the barber carrying the deities. On entering the shrine the Manasa and the clay horse of Gaila Buri are placed by the side of the wooden throne of Mangal Chandi. On the day before the annual festival of Mangal Chandi the Manasa of Tantipara village is similarly carried by the barber with the spreading of umbrella by the *sutradhar*. On her way to the shrine of Mangal Chandi the Manasa deity is kept at the root of an old *pipal* tree and is worshipped in presence of a big crowd. Then she is brought to the shrine according to the same procedure.

On the day of worship the *Deyashi* observes fasting throughout the day. The Brahmin priest performs the whole ceremony relating to the actual worship of Mangal Chandi. Before worship, the Mangal Chandi is taken out in a wooden throne by the Brahmin priest through the village path when a large crowd accompanies the deity. The womenfolk of the *Deyashi* family take the lead with *purnaghot*. Some of them blow conch shells, others make water line by pouring water from the pots in their hands. The throne is carried by the members of the *Deyashi* family. The *sutradhar* holds the umbrella on the deity's head. The large procession slowly moves on with the continuous beating of drums. The day is very hot and the sun is blazing at the middle of the sky. The sand-laden village path becomes fiery. But these cannot diminish the lustre of the festival; rather the brighter sun rejuvenates the festive mood. Ultimately the procession reaches the particular *pipal* tree at the southern side of the village. Here a ceremony is held with Mangal Chandi which is known as *Gachbera*¹⁵ or encircling the tree. The carrier of Mangal Chandi stands by the side of the tree and he is followed by eight women from the *Deyashi* family. One of the women holds *purnaghot* in her waist. Others hold the thread gradually unreeling from a bamboo spool and winding round the stem of the tree. Then all of the men and women start going round the tree for seven times. Other attending women blow conch

shells, some make *ulu* sound to celebrate the *gachbera* ceremony. After this the procession visits the shrine of Gaila Buri and then proceeds towards the shrine of Mangal Chandi. The *Deyashi* then comes forward to receive the deity from the processionists to be placed at her original seat.

The *bari*¹⁶ is ceremonially fetched from the tank at the eastern side of the village. It is carried by the Brahmin priest. A woman belonging to the *Deyashi* family carries *puṇaghot* from the said tank and she leads the priest carrying the *bari*. The drummers beat their drums; men, women and children accompany the carriers of *bari* and *puṇaghot* and celebrate this pious movement. When the procession with *bari* and *puṇaghot* passes the village paths, the womenfolk of the different household stand at their doorsteps with *puṇaghot* in their hands for showing proper respect to Mangal Chandi. The *bari* is placed inside the shrine just at the bottom of the seat of Mangal Chandi. The *puṇaghot* is kept at the right corner of the shrine. The priest then takes his seat to worship the goddess. A large number of devotees and *faridis* attend the shrine and they observe the different phases of the ceremony from close quarters. The priest is assisted by his son. The *Deyashi* does not interfere into the actual worship but he supervises all aspects of the ceremonial functions sitting just at the temple door of Mangal Chandi. The worship is conducted by the priest in a purely Brahminical procedure. The *Yajna* performance is held at the verandah of the shrine. It is a worthseeing performance. All the participants observe the celebrated ceremony of the lighting of the sacred fire and hear the solemn hymns uttered in a rhythmic tone by the Brahmin priest. All are permitted to come within the boundary of the shrine and to observe the whole proceedings. A large number of goats and sheep are sacrificed by the Brahmin sacrificer. These animals are brought by the devotees and *faridis* of Mangal Chandi as a token of deep regard to her. Sometimes promises are also made before the deity for animal sacrifice on the accomplishment of a work. The official sacrificer becomes exhausted by continuous chopping work. As per general custom the chopped off heads and one of the hind legs of the sacrificed animals are taken by the management of the annual festival.

After the completion of the ceremonial functions of the day

the *Deyashi* takes his seat at the temple premises with the heaps of herbal medicines and benedictory flowers brought from the seat of the goddess. The *faridis* approach him one by one and communicate their desire and troubles. The *Deyashi* gives them medicines, if required, on payment of requisite fee; or they are given some portions of benedictory flowers of the goddess. They bow down before the deity and offer *pranami* in cash as per ability. The *Deyashi* manages everything relating to the affairs of the devotees and the *faridis*, and the Brahmin priest has nothing to do here.

On the eighth day of worship, i.e., on *astamangala* day the Brahmin priest comes to the shrine and with a formal permission from the *Deyashi* he arranges for immersion of the *bari* including the *puṇaghot*. During this time only the drummers of the village attend the ceremony. Most of the villagers accompany the procession going to the prescribed tank for immersion of the *bari*. With this the annual festival of Mangal Chandi comes to an end.

At Lauberia Village

Like the goddess Chandi of Metela a Bauri family of Lauberia village has in its possession a deity of similar name and nature. The annual festival, held on the first day of *Magh* (February-March) or *Akkhyen* day, is observed with considerable splendour and participated by numerous people belonging to all castes and communities. The mud-built shrine of the deity is cleaned and the floor is swabbed with a solution of cow-dung. When the floor is dried up, it is decorated with the drawings of *alpana*. The surrounding area of the shrine is also decorated with the hanging of the twigs of mango and *neem* tied by plaited straw ropes. The open courtyard in front of the shrine is covered with canopy to facilitate sitting arrangement of the large number of devotees and *faridis*. The *Deyashi* goes on fasting for the day of worship. From the early morning the devotees and *faridis* from far and near villages begin to assemble at the shrine. The drummers belonging to the Dom community of the village start playing on drums from the very morning of the day of worship. The deity has her traditional drummers who work generations after generations on nominal remuneration. The *Deyashi* sends formal invitation to the head of the musical party on the eve of

annual festival. During the annual festival Chandi at Lauberia an interesting picture of village level participation is clearly noticed. All the dominant caste-groups of the village not only attend the ceremony but also they take active interest in the different activities relating to the preparation and general supervision of the festival. Even the Brahmin priest comes to the shrine to observe the worship and to participate in an essential part of the ceremony. It is customary for the villagers to observe fasting, at least one person from each family, on the day of Chandi worship.

The actual worship starts at about 11-30 A.M. when the *Deyashi* takes his bath and purifies his body by wearing a copper bangle and a necklace of beads. The other two junior *Deyashis* engage themselves in collecting the offerings consisting of sun-dried rice, fruits, wafer of molasses, vermilion, milk, etc., from the large number of votaries of this village and other surrounding villages. The milk is collected in big vessels. The devotees and *faridis* from very distant places start coming from morning and by the time of worship the outskirts of the shrine becomes crowded with them. The *Deyashi* holds a large iron tongs in his hand and sits before the deity for worship. The worship is done by white lotus and marigold. It is seen that the *faridis* offer new cloth, sweets, vermilion to Chandi which are heaped up by the side of the altar. The *Deyashi* performs the worship with the help of his fellow-*Deyashis*. He does not use any sanskritic *mantras* and follow any strict orthodox procedure. The traditional headman of the village sits by the side of the *Deyashi* and observes the various stages of worship. The Brahmin priest who also takes his seat by the side of the altar is requested to offer sacred thread to the deity in which he has got the sole authority. He does it accordingly on behalf of the whole village. The *Deyashi* then bows down and touches the feet of the Brahmin priest. Then he passes on to the next item, i.e., *bharnama*. The *Deyashi* sits on his two folded legs and prays before the deity with his folded hands. The drummers beat their drums incessantly. Men, women and children throng to the shrine to observe *bharnama*. The *Deyashi* becomes abnormal within a few minutes and he begins to dance in his seating posture. It is believed by the people that the *Deyashi* has been 'possessed' by Chandi herself. Everybody present there wants

to have a look at him and silently prays for the blessings of the goddess. The headman who takes his seat by the side of the *Deyashi* stretched his right hand towards the 'possessed' *Deyashi* who gives him a few petals of lotus as the blessings of the deity. The headman receives these with due devotion on behalf of the whole village. He then asks the 'possessed' *Deyashi* about the different state of affairs of the village. A number of questions relating to general economic conditions of the village, health and hygiene, etc., are put by the headman. The *Deyashi* gives reply in a murmuring tone and with this he suggests the ways to tide over the crisis of village life. Other *faridis* and devotees then come forward to communicate their personal difficulties to the *Deyashi* with the expectation of getting suggestion and advice. The 'possessed' *Deyashi* after at least half an hour of his meditation comes back to senses.

A large number of goats and sheep are then sacrificed by one of the subsidiary *Deyashis*. First of all a special goat is sacrificed which is supplied by the *Deyashi* family. After sacrifice the chopped off head of the goat is brought to the deity and it is finally buried in the ground by the side of her altar. The chopped off heads and one of the hind legs of the other sacrificed animals are collected as usual by the sacrificer. This ends the day's ceremony when the participants bow down before the deity and pay small coins on a large brass plate placed beside the altar. The *Deyashi* then sits on a raised platform and meets the *faridis* one by one. The *faridis* consider this particular day as very auspicious for consultation with the *Deyashi* or to be oriented with his magical charms. As per necessity the *Deyashi* recites magical charms over the *faridis* and tries to blow out the cause of troubles.

PERFORMANCES OF MANASA WORSHIP

At Joydev-Kenduli Village

The goddess Manasa, known as Chintamani, is worshipped on the *Dasahara* in a specialized way when a large number of devotees and *faridis* attend the shrine to observe the different stages of the festival. The worship of the deity is fully conducted by the Bagdi *Deyashi* himself with the help of his family members. On the previous day of worship the shrine is cleaned

by the members of *Deyashi* family and the whole surrounding area is decorated with the hanging of mango twigs and displaying of flowers made out of coloured papers. From the very morning of the *Dasahara* the drummers beat their drums which attract large number of persons from far and near places. The *Deyashi* keeps in fasting for the day and in the early morning he, accompanied by the drummers, goes to the abyss of the Ajay river—Jamdaha—to bring *bari*. He carries with him an earthen pot, purchased from the market, a betel and a betel-nut. On reaching the abyss in question the *Deyashi* utters the name of Chintamani and asks her grace for filling up the pot. The betel and the betel-nut are thrown into the water and the empty pot is immersed in water. He then places the pot or *bari* on his head and proceeds towards the shrine. The womenfolk of the Bagdi community ceremonially receive the *bari* through the blowing of conch shells and making the sound of *ulu*. The *Deyashi* enters the shrine and the *bari* is placed in front of the altar of Chintamani. In the meantime, the devotees and *faridis* begin to gather and within a few hours the whole of the surrounding area of the shrine becomes crowded with them. The *Deyashi* with the help of his assistants then arranges to worship the deity. A large number of persons belonging to the different villages come with their votive offerings and present these to the *Deyashi*. Most of them bring goats and sheep to be sacrificed before the deity. By the middle of the day whole of the surrounding area takes the appearance of a fair.

The worship of the deity is made with the help of lotus, marigold, water lily together with *bel* leaves. The sun-dried rice that are offered by the devotees are heaped up on two large leaves of arum. The sweets of different kinds are systematically arranged on the heaped-up rice. The *Deyashi* wears a copper ring on one of the fingers of his right hand and wears a new cloth. He sits on a grass mat and worships Chintamani Manasa and her associates. There is no special *mantras* for worship, the Bagdi *Deyashi* worships the deities in a very simple way, the altarage is forwarded in a solemn way. After the worship is completed, the *homa* or burning of the sacred fire is performed before the deity which is presided over by the Brahmin priest of the Bagdis. During this period a few elderly persons belonging to the Brahmin community attend the shrine. The astrologer of

the neighbouring village supplies all the articles for the performance of *homa*. The *Deyashi* does not take any active part in the *homa* ceremony but he extends all sorts of cooperation in the smooth performance of the *homa*. The Brahmin priest tries to observe sanskritic procedures in this performance. After the completion of the *homa* he sprinkles *santijal* to the attending persons and *Yajna-tilak* is given to the persons who attend the ceremony from close quarters.

One of the assistants of the *Deyashi* works as official sacrificer and he is the person who continuously immolate a large number of goats and sheep at the immolation stand in front of the door of the shrine. The attending persons cried aloud when the sacrificer keeps up his sword to fall suddenly on the stretched out neck of the dedicated animal. With every strike of sword the drummers beat their drums vigorously. As per custom of the locality the sacrificer keeps the chopped off heads and one of the hind legs of the sacrificed animals.

The *Deyashi* then sits down in front of the deity. Profuse incense are burnt and all the attending persons try to come at close quarters of the *Deyashi*. In his sitting position the *Deyashi* tries to answer all the questions put forward by the *faridis* in respect of their health and hygiene. He also gives medicines to the *faridis* at this period and receives various offerings and cash payments from them or their relatives. It is the busiest day for *Deyashi* and he is to perform all the responsible duties pertaining to all-day festival and rendering of service to the *faridis*.

At Bhanra Village

Manasa of Bhanra village is worshipped annually on *Baka Panchami* day, i.e., the fifth day on the bright half of the Bengali month of *Bhadra* (August-September). The Bagdi community takes it as a first hand duty to help in preparatory activities relating to the annual worship of Manasa residing at Bagdipara. The altar of Manasa is repaired with mud and when it is dried, the altar is whitewashed. The shrine is thatched with new straw and the *natmandir* is cleaned in addition to the requisite decoration with the hanging of mango twigs by straw ropes. The *Deyashi* invites ceremonially the Brahmin priest living at Tanti-para village to perform the different stages of the festival. Most of the functions relating to the daily and occasional worships are

conducted by the Bagdi *Deyashi* himself. But the annual worship of Manasa is mostly performed by the Brahmin priest serving the Bagdi community of the region. The *Deyashi* arranges every thing relating to worship and he observes fasting for the day until the worship is completed. The traditional drummers of Manasa come from Metela village who start their function from the previous day of worship and continue it up to the third day. In the morning of *Baka Panchami Manasa-bari* is ceremonially brought from the abyss of Bakreswar river—the *Bhonr Chandi*. There are two *baris*—one is main and the other is known as subsidiary. The main *bari* is carried by the Brahmin priest on his head, whereas the subsidiary one is held by the son of *Deyashi* in the same fashion. The *Bhonr Chandi*, where Manasa is believed to have appeared long ago, is crowded with large number of devotees coming from Bhanra and other neighbouring villages to see the auspicious ceremony of lifting *bari* from the abyss. It is also seen that the *faridis* even from very distant places attend this ceremony after coming over this almost inaccessible part of the country with considerable difficulty. A *sal* leaf plate full of sun-dried rice, wafer of molasses, betel and betel-nut is offered at the bank of the Bakreswar river through a short ceremony conducted by the priest. Then the two empty earthen pots brought from the shrine are immersed in water to get these filled up. These are then taken over by the priest and the son of *Deyashi* on their heads. The *Deyashi* leads the procession to the shrine with the continuous beating of drums. The womenfolk of the Bagdi community ceremonially receive the *Manasa-bari* through *ulu* sound and the blowing of conch shells. On reaching the shrine the *Manasa-baris* are placed on the altar which rest on some quantity of paddy. In the meantime, the devotees begin to attend the shrine with their offerings for the *puja* which consists of parched rice, sun-dried rice, fried grams, betel, betel-nut and vermilion. Along with these some votive offerings are also made in which red-bordered *sari*, red napkin and he-goat or he-sheep are brought to the shrine. Two sons of the *Deyashi* act as assistants who collect all the offerings from the devotees and *faridis* for keeping these at the place of worship.

The priest sits on a grass mat before the altar and starts worship. First of all, he smears vermilion mixed with oil on the two *baris* and also on the altar. Then sacred threads are wound

round the two *baris*. Two mango twigs are placed on the mouth of the *baris* on which two betels are placed. The *Deyashi* takes his seat by the side of the priest and helps him all along to complete the worship. The priest performs the worship in a purely Brahminical way though his activities are restricted to some local traditions. The ceremony of *homa* is performed with much devotion when the priest maintains a distance from the activities of the Bagdi *Deyashi*. The *Deyashi* or his assistants are not allowed to participate even indirectly in the ceremony of *homa* as it is considered as a purely sanskritized way of propitiation in which only the Brahmins have got proper authority. The astrologer from Metela village supplies all the essential commodities for conducting the *homa* ceremony. He takes his seat just opposite to the priest and helps him in the organization of the ceremony. At the end the priest offers *ghee* to the burning fire in the standing position when all the participants and observers stand up from their places and look at the sacred fire with profound devotion.

Then the dedicated animals, he-goats and he-sheep, are sacrificed, one after another, by the elder son of the *Deyashi*. These are mostly brought by the *faridis* coming from different villages who stay there overnight for receiving medicine. The *Baka Panchami* day is considered by the *faridis* as very effective for consultation with the *Deyashi* and for receiving medicines from him. After the completion of all works relating to the worship and sacrifice the priest starts for his village. He does not interfere into the work of animal sacrifice but it is he who ceremonially dedicates the animals by applying vermilion on their heads and touching the blessings-oriented petals from the altar of the deity. But he observes the activity from the side of the altar as it is his responsibility to complete this function without any difficulty.

The *Deyashi* takes his position in front of the deity. At this time he wears bead necklace round his neck. He holds a large iron tongs and passes sometimes in meditated mood. It is said that the *Deyashi*, in this way, tries to get the formal permission of the deity for consulting the cases of the large number of *faridis* who have attended the shrine with the expectation of getting the blessings of Manasa. He passes an indication to his assistant in respect of divine permission, who,

in turn, communicates the waiting *faridis* at the *natmandir* to come, one by one, before the *Deyashi* to express their desires. The *Deyashi* asks each of the *faridis* to bow down before the deity at the very outset and then narrate the difficulty. As per particular problems the *Deyashi* puts suggestions to the *faridi* concerned and gives medicines or conducts magical performance if necessary. The *Deyashi* receives payments from the *faridis* which depend according to the seriousness of the problems and the nature of medicine.

At Tantipara Village

Manasa of Tantipara village is worshipped annually on the *sankranti* of the Bengali month *Sarvana* (July-August). This deity, housed in the midst of the fishermen community, has got some specialities of her own. During annual festival the whole of Tantipara village becomes filled up with tremendous joy and merriment. The villagers consider it as a special opportunity to show their profound respect to the rousing snake deity. All the surrounding villages pray for blessings from Manasa of Tantipara during the period of crises. Therefore, on the occasion of annual festival a large number of men, women and children come to the shrine of Manasa to show their regard to the deity. The *Deyashi* of Manasa makes arrangements for the festival. He shoulders the responsibility of meeting the expenditures. Most of the devotees and *faridis* of Manasa make cash payments to help meeting the expenditures.

On the eve of annual worship the womenfolk of the *Deyashi* family cleans the shrine and washes everything relating to the worship of the deity. The *natmandir*, in front of the shrine, is decorated with coloured paper flowers. Smaller twigs of mango and *neem* are also applied to give the whole surrounding an auspicious look. The *Deyashi* observes fasting and he keeps everything at hand. The worship is performed by the Brahmin priest who receives formal invitation by the *Deyashi* family. On reaching the shrine on the appointed day the Brahmin priest, first of all, establishes the *bari* at the foot of the altar and then it is ceremonially awakened through the application of incantations. Before this the *bari* is decorated with sacred

vermilion marks and mango twigs accompanied by a green coconut.

The drummers of this village attend the ceremony from beginning to end and they are traditional musicians in the shrine of Manasa. The ceremonial placing of *bari* is associated with a particular type of drum-beating which continues for at least an hour. On hearing this special drum-beat the villagers from far and near villages begin to reach the shrine with their respective offerings. As per convention all the households of the different villages offer parched rice, fried kidney beans, grams and wafers of molasses. Betel, betel-nuts and vermilion are also offered in a separate leaf plate. These are collected by the women folk of the *Deyashi* family.

The priest performs the worship following the Brahminical procedure. He loudly recites sanskrit *mantras* and in his every movement he sticks to the background of *Puranic* mythology. The worship is followed by the ceremony of *homa* when the *Grahacharya*, Brahmins and other higher caste groups try to dominate. The *Deyashi* does not find any responsible position in this sphere but he is always ready for the service of supervision relating to the whole affair. The sacrifices of he-goats, he-sheep and also of pumpkin, sugarcane sticks are made before the deity in which the Brahmin priest takes active part. A person from the priest's family works as a sacrificer of animals and other objects. The work of animal sacrifice is witnessed by a large number of devotees and *faridis*. It is considered as a holy activity to have a look into the dedication of animals to the goddess Manasa. The chopped off heads and one of the hind legs of the sacrificed animals are kept at the shrine under the disposal of the sacrificer. These are then distributed and the rest portions are cooked as per direction of the *Deyashi* following the traditional convention.

The *Deyashi* then becomes ready to perform his special activities before the deity. He wears a bead necklace round his neck, a copper ring is fitted to the middle finger of the right hand. The womenfolk of the *Deyashi* family prepare a seat of grass mat before the deity. A long iron trident is placed beside the seat. It is the time for sitting in deep meditation. The *Deyashi* takes his seat in front of the goddess Manasa and prays to her with folded hands. He holds the

trident in the upright position and suddenly asks the *faridis* to approach him one by one. The *faridis* put forward their difficulties and desire to get relief from the diseases.

At Metela Village

The goddess Manasa is worshipped at Metela village in two different centres.

(1) At the Shrine of Dharmaraj

The goddess Manasa, worshipped at Metela, comes from the neighbouring village known as Agar. There is no special date of worship but it is generally performed in the months of *Asarh* (June-July) and *Sravan* (July-August). During this particular period the formal village Panchayat settles the matter relating to the date fixation of Manasa worship. Generally this worship is performed annually. The traditional headman of the village intimates the date for worship of Manasa to the *Deyashi* concerned at Agar, on the one hand, and asks the traditional Dom drummer to make a proclamation by drum-beat throughout the village, on the other. With the drum-beat the villagers, irrespective of castes and communities become alert regarding their duties and responsibilities. On the previous day of worship the *Deyashi* of Manasa at Agar asks for formal permission of the deity to carry her to Metela village as per request of the villagers concerned. He gets divine permission eventually and becomes ready for the journey. A large procession composed of the villagers of Metela belonging to the different castes and communities and accompanied by the drummers start for Agar. On reaching the shrine the headman or his representative approaches the *Deyashi* concerned to start for Metela with the particular clay horse—a direct representative of the goddess Manasa. The drummers begin to beat their drums vigorously. The accompanying persons praise in a voice in the name of the goddess Manasa. Ultimately the procession reaches the village Metela and it is customary to have a round through the village paths before placing the goddess on the altar in the shrine. On completion of the village tour the clay horse is placed on the seat or altar of Manasa inside the temple of Dharmaraj which has been previously kept clean.

The *Deyashi*, Sadgop by caste, worships the deity himself. He is assisted by the Brahmin priest of the village in some stages of worship. All the villagers observe some restrictions that are imposed on them in their daily mode of life. Each and every household of the village sends offerings to the deity as per ability of the individual household. The assistants of the *Deyashi* collect all these offerings from the villagers and keep them in the different large containers inside the shrine. It is customary for the *Deyashi* to take formal permission from the village headman for starting the worship of the goddess which generally commences at about 1 P.M. All the dignified personalities of the village like the traditional headmen, the village priest, the astrologer and other higher caste elderly persons take their seats inside the shrine. They impart necessary suggestions and advice if and when required. The *Deyashi* wears a bead necklace and smears his forehead with deep vermilion marks. A new red napkin is thrown over the shoulders. The worship is made by white lotus and *bel* leaves. During this the *Deyashi* uses indigenous *mantras* received traditionally from his forefathers though there are some impositions of sanskritic *mantras* borrowed from the Brahminical scriptures. After worship of the Sadgop *Deyashi* the Brahmin priest of the village is requested to perform the sanskritic rites like the offering of sacred thread to the goddess and the accomplishment of the burning of sacred fire. The *homa* or burning of sacred fire is fully conducted by the Brahmin priest with the help of the *grahacharya*. This is performed through purely Brahminical procedures. The *Yajna-tilak* is prepared by the priest out of burnt charcoal taken from one corner of the sacred fire place after sprinkling sacred water over it. He offers *Yajna-tilak* to the *grahacharya* first and then the *Deyashi* and his assistants are marked with *Yajna-tilak*. After this all the attending persons are served by the assistants of the priest.

Animal sacrifice is a special item of worship of the goddess Manasa. From the villagers' side one he-goat is sacrificed and it is purchased from the subscriptions collected by the traditional Manasa *pūja* committee. The priest's representative acts as the official sacrificer. A large number of devotees bring he-goat or he-sheep for sacrifice before the deity. The chopped

off heads and one of the hind legs of the sacrificed animals are kept aside by the sacrificer. These are divided into two equal halves. One half is sent to the *Deyashi* family at Agar village, and the other half is cooked during the ceremonial feeding of the workers of the Manasa *puja*.

At the closing phase of worship the *Deyashi* prepares a special seat before the goddess to offer himself in a condition of self-absorbed meditation when the devotees belonging to the different castes and communities assemble round the *Deyashi* to make their votive offerings. The village headman, first of all receives ceremonial blessings on behalf of the villagers. The former prays to the goddess through the meditated *Deyashi* for trouble-free village life. It is frequently seen that the votive offerings to the goddess do not confine to the different food articles together with a few coins, the grateful devotees offer gold ornaments to the deity. All the attending persons do not leave the shrine until they receive the deity's blessing in the form of one or two petals of flowers or *bel* leaves taken from the altar of the Manasa. The *prasad* consisting of flattened rice, milk and molasses is distributed amongst all the attending persons, and this indicates the concluding phase of the ceremony.

On completion of worship the goddess is taken over to her original shrine by the *Deyashi*. The drummers and the representative of the village headman accompany him up to the shrine of Manasa at Agar. The *Deyashi* performs a brief ceremony before replacing the representative of Manasa at the original seat. The drummers and other escorts then return to their village and ceremonially inform the matter by the beating of drums at the shrine for some time.

(2) At the Shrine of Chandi

The goddess Manasa situated at the famous shrine of Chandi at Metela village is considered by the villagers as a rousing deity and all the villagers, irrespective of castes and communities, attend the annual festival held on the *Naga-Panchami* day. The *Deyashi* shoulders all the responsibilities of worship and he takes the initiative in communicating the matter relating to the worship of Manasa to the formal village council. In the evening of the previous day of worship the *Manasa-bari* is ceremonially

brought from the tank situated at the western corner of the village. It is a very enjoyable and thrilling affair. The *Deyashi* and his two assistants accompanied by the drummers and a large crowd start for the tank with empty earthen pitchers. They observe fasting for the day and wear new clothes with new napkins thrown over the shoulders. On reaching the tank the *Deyashi* and his assistants step down to knee-deep water to observe a short ceremony there. The *Deyashi* recites indigenous hymns over the water of the tank. He then invites the goddess Manasa to come with them to her celebrated shrine in the village. The *Deyashi* directs his assistants to place the pitchers inside the water of the tank. When the pitchers become full of water, these are taken on the heads of the respective persons. The drummers continue to beat their drums vigorously and they begin to proceed towards the village. The *Deyashi* and his assistants follow them with the *Manasa-bari* on their heads. On reaching the shrine the *Deyashi* stops at the threshold which is followed by his assistants. The *Manasa-bari* is then ceremonially received by the womenfolk of the community by blowing of conch shells and making of *ulu* sound. An elderly woman sprinkles water over the ground from a bell-metal water pot. The carriers of *Manasa-bari* follow this water-marked path and ultimately establish *Manasa-bari* below the altar of the goddess.

The worship is conducted by the *Deyashi* himself. The villagers from all wards send offerings to the deity either personally or through messengers. A considerable number of *faridis* also visit the shrine of Manasa during this time. They ask for personal and familial welfare through the eradication of diseases. Different kinds of votive offerings are made by these devotees which consist of sun-dried rice, vegetables, wafers of molasses, other dry sweets, betel, betel-nut, vermilion, mustard oil, milk, red-bordered sari, red napkins, etc. He-goats or he-sheep are dedicated to the deity for sacrifice. The *Deyashi* receives ceremonially all these votive offerings on behalf of the goddess and communicates blessings from the deity concerned. The worship is purely done in an indigenous method and no trace of any sanskritic beliefs and practices is to be seen here. A large number of goats and sheep are sacrificed before the deity in the midst of vigorous drum-beating.

The *Deyashi* at the concluding phase of worship, takes his

special seat before the deity and gradually absorbs himself in deep meditation. Ultimately he is possessed by the deity. The devotees and the *faridis* wait anxiously for the opportune moment to present their respective problems to the goddess-possessed *Deyashi*. There is a belief in this locality that this charm-oriented medicine has a tremendous effect in averting poisonous snakes from its possessors. The *Deyashi* receives *pranami* in cash which ranges from 10 paise to one rupee from his clientele. All the attending persons are offered *prasad* at the end of the ceremony when they proceed towards their home.

PERFORMANCES OF THE WORSHIP OF MAHADANA

At Shibpur Village

On the *Akkhyen* day the worship of Mahadana at Shibpur village is performed by the Bagdi *Deyashi* with the help and co-operation of all the villagers. The *than* of Mahadana is cleaned on the previous day and the small shrine is whitewashed. The *Deyashi* and his associates collect house to house subscription, in cash or in kinds, at least two weeks before the annual festival. It is seen that all the villagers contribute their mite in the name of Mahadana—a rousing tutelary village deity. Moreover, the owners of the paddy fields in the vicinity of the *than* of Mahadana willingly offer 5 stalks of harvested paddy each in honour of the deity. During the seasons of cultivation and harvesting of crops the workers of these paddy fields are to stay there overnight and it is universally believed that if they do not offer the nominal amount of harvested crops, they would have to face serious consequences. On this ground it has become customary for the harvesters to keep five bundles of reaped paddy separately in the name of Mahadana. These are finally handed over to the *Deyashi* concerned.

The drummers belonging to the Muchi community of the village beat their drums at the lonely paddy fields from early morning. The *Deyashi* accompanies them. It is believed that Mahadana “awakes” on hearing the vigorous drum-beating. The *Deyashi* with his associates then go out to collect rice, vegetables, mustard oil, etc., from the selected families of the village. The *Deyashi* collects two large pitcherfuls of *handia* from the village liquor booth on a customary payment

of two seers of rice and 50 paise in cash. The owner of the liquor booth prepares these two pitchers of *handia* in a separate oven prepared for this purpose. At about 12 O'clock the *Deyashi* and his associates start for the *than* of Mahadana with two pitchers of *handia* on shoulders. The drummers lead them with profuse drum-beat. A large crowd belonging to all ages and sexes from the adjoining villages reach the *than* of Mahadana to observe the different stages of the festival. On reaching the *than* the *Deyashi* places the pitchers of *handia* at the shrine. On a large leaf of *arum* huge amount of flattened rice is heaped up. Milk is kept in a large brass vessel. Just by its side there is an earthen pot for keeping molasses. The devotees bring offerings prior to worship which consist of flattened rice, milk and molasses. Many *faridis* dedicate their votive offerings like wooden sandals, hemp and earthen funnel for smoking hemp.

The *Deyashi* with the help of his assistants makes preliminary arrangements for worship at the shrine. Two leaf-plates are placed in front of the deity and a *bhog* of flattened rice with milk and molasses is kept in one, while the other is supplied with semi-solid portion of *handia* taken out from the bottom of the pitcher. The worship is performed with the help of marigold, oleander flowers and *bel* leaves—through fully indigenous way. There is no incantation, no prescribed charms for the purpose; the *Deyashi* simply invokes the deity to come down for receiving the hearty offerings. There is an official woman 'possessor' who holds the hereditary post. Just after the completion of worship by the *Deyashi*, the official 'possessor' becomes ready to be absorbed in deep meditation. Her body begins to tremble and the head starts nodding. All the devotees and *faridis* rush to her to ask various personal questions. At the end the *Deyashi* moves towards her and asks one by one, a number of questions relating to the nature and extent of worship of Mahadana as well as various problems of village life in general.

The *Deyashi* then sacrifices a white duck before the deity which is followed by a large number of sacrifices of fowls, goats, sheep and also sugarcane sticks. These are sacrificed by one of the assistants of the *Deyashi*. All the persons attending the shrine are then invited to receive *prasad* consisting of flattened rice, milk, molasses together with pieces of fruits and sugarcane slices. On completion of *prasad* distribution the

Deyashi and his assistants take over the pitchers of *handia* on their shoulders. Others take the remaining materials and utensils of worship. All of them then proceed towards the village who are followed by the large crowd. Within half an hour the procession reaches *Kalitala* where the pitchers of *handia* are placed at the seat of Mahadana. The *handia* is then distributed amongst the members of the Bagdi and Lohar communities living in the vicinity of *Kalitala*.

At Metela Village

Mahadana of Metela originally resides in a tank in the vicinity of his specially prepared *than* within the boundary of the famous goddess Chandi in Bauripara. The worship of Mahadana is performed both in the tank and at the *than*. At the *ghat* on the eastern side of the tank, where Mahadana is believed to reside, a small area is cleaned and smeared with cow-dung paste. It is then decorated with *alpana* of sun-dried rice solution. The *than* is also similarly cleaned and ornamented with designs of *alpana*. On the first *Magh* (January-February) the worship of Mahadana is held at the *ghat* of the tank at mid-day. The special altar of the deity, prepared on the day before worship is decorated with flowers and *bel* leaves. A pitcher of *handia* is supplied by the owner of the village liquor booth which is placed by the side of the altar. A plateful of *bhog* consisting of flattened rice and molasses is given to the deity. Just by its side there is another plate containing fried rice and fried grams. The *Deyashi* takes his bath at the tank and during this time he invokes the deity by a peculiar technique of propelling his hands within water. A large number of people belonging to Metela and other adjoining villages stand by the sides of the tank to see the invoking performance. The *Deyashi* suddenly jumps over the *ghat* from water with the declaration that Mahadana has taken his seat on the special altar. The drummers start beating their drums and the surrounding people begin to clap. In the meantime, the devotees start coming with their various offerings. A large number of *faridis* attend the ceremony to pay respect to the deity. The total expenditures of the festival is met by the *Deyashi* himself. He receives a considerable amount of subscriptions and donations from the devotees and *faridis* prior to worship.

The *Deyashi* wears a red cloth and a bead necklace is seen round his neck. He holds a large tongs in his hand and sits on the ground in front of the altar. The assistants of *Deyashi* make all the arrangements for worship. The *Deyashi* adores the deity by sprinkling water and *handia* on the altar. The *bhog* materials are taken in some quantity and these are thrown over the altar with the invocation of the deity to take these offerings. The *Deyashi* recites in a murmuring tone a large number of magical spells and due to which the whole surrounding atmosphere becomes mysterious. People attending the ceremony observe the whole situation in a mixed attitude of curiosity and fear. After the worship a pig is sacrificed. The pig is dedicated ceremonially by the *Deyashi*. He puts vermilion mark on the forehead of the pig after pouring a pot of water on it signifying a ceremonial bath. The pig is sacrificed in the midst of vigorous drum-beating and hulla baloo of the attending people. The chopped off head of the sacrificed pig is immediately caught by the *Deyashi* and he throws it in the water of the *ghat*. It is believed that Mahadana returns to the tank with this chopped off head and takes his original shelter there until he is invited again for the purpose of worship.

The second part of the festival is held on the *third Magh* and after the completion of Chandi worship. The *than* of Mahadana within the boundary of 'goddess Chandi' is cleared and smeared with cow-dung paste previously. In the morning of the prescribed day of worship the womenfolk of Bauri community draw *alpana* on the altar including the adjacent floor. The *Deyashi*, in his traditional make-up, sits before the altar of Mahadana when a large crowd surrounds him. The *Deyashi* makes some formal offerings to the deity. The attending persons watch this with profound devotion. A fowl is sacrificed and blood is sprinkled over the altar of Mahadana. The *Deyashi* then asks any of the attending people to come forward and present himself before the altar to be possessed by the deity. When a young man gives response to this call, the *Deyashi* instructs him to sit down by the side of the altar. The *Deyashi* sprinkles some magic-oriented water on him and gives him a slap on his head. It is surprising to note that at this very moment the man concerned becomes abnormal and his whole body starts trembling vigorously. Suddenly a live fowl is thrown to him which he

immediately tears into pieces by his teeth and nails. The *Deyashi* then directs the possessed man to dig out the corners of the altar by his teeth and find out medicines to be used for the prevention of epidemics in the village. The possessed persons does it accordingly and after a heavy search he ultimately finds out the medicine and catches it in between his teeth. The *Deyashi* snatches it from his teeth and hands it over to the village headman standing by the side of the altar. It is preserved at the house of the village headman from where, it is believed, it exerts its preventive influence throughout the whole village. If epidemic occurs in any of the neighbouring villages this preventive medicine is ceremonially carried by the *Deyashi* to that village and it is kept in a public religious place for the time being. After the search of medicine is duly performed, the *Deyashi* holds the head of the possessed man and throws him at the backside. Due to this sudden push the man concerned falls flat on his back and with this fall the possession comes to an end. He behaves like a normal man and cannot recollect any of his activities conducted by him through the instruction of the *Deyashi*.

The *Deyashi* then takes his seat by the side of the altar of Mahadana. A number of devotees and *faridis* offer fowls in honour of Mahadana. These are handed over to the *Deyashi* who holds these, one by one, and utters charms over these to let them roam about freely within the boundary of the deities. He also prescribes medicines to the *faridis* but only the serious cases are dealt with to avoid heavy rush.

PERFORMANCES OF THE WORSHIP OF GODDESS KALI

At Shibpur Village

Goddess Kali of Shibpur is worshipped on the new moon day of *Kartick* (October-November) by the direct supervision of the Bagdi *Deyashi*. People belonging to all castes and communities of the village consider the worship of Kali as their own affair and, therefore, everybody comes forward to participate in the festival. The shrine of the goddess is cleaned and other arrangements are duly made by the *Deyashi* with the help of his family members and neighbours. The expenditures are met by the collection of subscriptions from the different families of the village. In addition to paying subscriptions in cash there are some

dominant families in the village who donate ample quantity of rice, pulses, flattened rice, new *sari*, napkin, *chandmala*, etc. These are traditionally arranged and all the families become alert in sending their respective donation to the shrine of Kali on the eve of worship. Three earthen pitchers, to be used as *bari*, are supplied by the potter caste at the neighbouring village on a token payment of one seer of rice. These three *baris* are meant for the goddess Kali, Bhairab and Mahadana. Two potsful of *handia* are brought from the village liquor booth, the owner of which takes it as his sacred duty to prepare the *handia* for worship in a sanctified way. The idol of the goddess is prepared by a *sutradhar* family of Bishnupur village which is the traditional maker of the goddess Kali.

The *Deyashi* and his two assistants observe fasting on the previous day of worship and in the night they start for the rivulet flowing by the side of the village. A large number of women belonging to the Bagdi and Lohar castes follow them with small pots. They also remain in fasting for the whole day. The drum-beaters belonging to Bishnupur village lead the procession from the shrine to the rivulet. On reaching the *ghat* of the rivulet the *Deyashi* performs a brief worship there and invokes the deities to be kind enough to offer their blessings to the devotees and the organizers of worship. The *Deyashi*, his assistants and other accompanying men and women, actively participating in the bringing of *bari*, start brushing their teeth with the help of twigs. Then all of them take bath in the rivulet, and after which the *Deyashi* and his assistants fill their pitchers with water. Everybody praises loudly in the name of goddess Kali, god Bhairab and Mahadana. The female *bratees*¹⁷ also fill their pots with water. The three *baris*, meant for Kali, Bhairab and Mahadana, are taken on heads by the *Deyashi* and his two assistants. All the female *bratees* follow them on their way to the shrine. The drummers show their feats of drum-beating at this time and it is taken as essential to beat the drums vigorously and rhythmically for the invocation of the deities. The procession moves very slowly. The carriers of three *baris* proceed towards the shrine step by step in sluggish movement. They become possessed by the respective deities and start jerking their bodies. At times it is seen that they become reluctant to proceed further any more when the attendants start burning of profuse incense, the

drum-beats become more and more vigorous, and the accompanying persons request the carriers of *baris* to be kind enough to start for the shrine. It is a very remarkable situation and numerous villagers watch this affair in the dead hours of night. The female *bratees* become possessed, one by one, due to burning of incense and violent drum-beating. They are attended by their relatives and friends. On being possessed, *bratee* refuses to go to the shrine and she throws her hands and feet in a wild manner. On the other hand, all the attendants become engaged in taking the carriers of *baris* to the shrine. Continuous drum-beating goes on vigorously; profuse incense burning makes the whole atmosphere cloudy but the carriers do not like to move. At last the attendants take hold of their legs and thereby make them move step by step though very slowly. The night is going to be over but the attendants, accompanying persons and the spectators do not become impatient, rather they enjoy the night with immense delight. At last the carriers of *baris* reach the shrine. The Bagdi and the Lohar women show a formal reception by blowing of conch shell and making the sound of *ulu*. The *bari* meant for the goddess Kali is placed below the altar where the image has been installed. The other two *baris* meant for Bhairab and Mahadana are kept at one side of the altar.

The annual worship of the goddess Kali is performed by the Brahmin priest serving the Bagdi community with the direct assistance and supervision of the *Deyashi*. The Brahmin priest tries to follow the Brahminical procedures in the organization of worship as far as possible but there are a number of non-sanskritic items like the use of *handia*, ceremony of possession, etc. The non-Brahminic participants are allowed to handle the materials for worship. On the eve of actual worship the villagers bring offerings consisting of rice, vegetables, fruits, flattened rice, milk, wafers of molasses, betel, betel-nut, vermilion, *alta*, etc. Most of the influential high caste villagers attend the ceremony of worship. After worship the Brahmin priest performs the *Yajna* with the help of the *grahacharya* of Bishnupur village. The *Deyashi* does not take part in this ceremony. The Brahmin priest applies *Yajna-tilak* and offers *santijal* to the attending persons through Brahminical procedure. Everything is then left to the *Deyashi*, who, in turn, takes the responsibility of the next stages of the ceremony. He performs a brief worship of the deity and

arranges for *prasad* consisting of flattened rice, milk and molasses in a large tray. He then directs the official sacrificer to bring the animals and other materials to be sacrificed to the deity for dedication through him. After it is performed, the sacrificer is allowed to sacrifice these before the deity. The goats and sheep are not sacrificed in front of the goddess Kali. These are done at the backside of the shrine in the name of Bhairab. Only sugarcane sticks are sacrificed before Kali.¹⁸ A goat is also sacrificed at the *than* of Mahadana in the midst of paddy fields.

The woman 'possessor' belonging to Bagdi community takes her seat in a room of her house in front of a *puṇnaghot*, burning lamp and network of smoke emitting from incense burner. She absorbs in deep meditation. When the drummers reach her house from the shrine with continuous beating of drums, she begins to dance in a wild manner at her courtyard and proceeds towards the shrine of Kali in dancing condition. After showing various feats of dancing at the shrine of Kali she moves towards the *than* of Mahadana at the far off paddy fields. All the organizers of worship, drummers and participants accompany her. After dancing for short duration there the possessor returns to the shrine of Kali and lies flat before the goddess when a large number of *faridis* and devotees approach her through the *Deyashi* for her suggestions and advice in the treatment and cure of various diseases, and also for the solution of different problems of life. In the evening all women belonging to the different families of the village attend the shrine with mustard oil, vermilion, betel, betel-nut and sweets to offer their homage on the eve of immersion ceremony of the goddess. On the eighth day after immersion the straw-made structure is brought to shrine and is placed on the altar. The *chandmala*¹⁹, which is offered by the Sinha family of the village, is wound round the straw-made structure through the year.

At Metela Village

The goddess Kali of Metela village is worshipped by the *Deyashi* himself on the new-moon day of *Agrahayan* (November-December). The idol is prepared by the *sutradhar* caste of Metela and it is placed on a special altar in the shrine of Chandi and Manasa. On the previous day of worship the shrine is decorated with *alpana* and flowers of coloured papers. In the

evening the elderly persons of the Bauri community come to the shrine for some formal discussions with the *Deyashi*, who seeks help and co-operation from his fellow members. From the morning of the day of worship the villagers bring offerings of sun-dried rice, flattened rice, milk, molasses, vermilion, etc. The *bari* is brought by the *Deyashi* himself from the tank at the western corner of the village. The *Deyashi* accompanied by the drummers, his assistants and a large number of devotees reaches the tank with an empty earthen pot. He performs a detailed ceremony at the *ghat* of the tank where a lamp is lit and profuse incense is burnt. It is called as the invocation ceremony. The *Deyashi* becomes deeply absorbed and after some time he sprinkles water at all directions. The drummers start beating their drums violently. The *Deyashi* goes to the knee-deep water and pours water into the empty pot. He puts the filled up pot or *bari* on his head and proceeds towards the shrine. The *bari* is ceremonially welcomed by the different household at both sides of the village path with the blowing of conch shells and making sound of *ulu*. A large number of women with *purnaghot* come to *natmandir* of Dharmaraj to show special regard to the goddess Kali entering into the village. When the procession reaches the shrine, the womenfolk of the Bauri community receives the *bari* through the sprinkling of water from a water pot with the sound of *ulu*.

The worship of the goddess is performed at the dead hours of night. The *Deyashi* organizes the different aspects of worship in his indigenous way. Extravagant use of rice beer is seen during the organization of worship. A large number of fowls, ducks, goats and sheep are sacrificed. The goddess Kali of Metela is regarded as the deity of profound magico-religious performances. The *Deyashi* performs his various feats of magico-religious activities before the goddess Kali throughout the year. It is because of this fact the *Deyashi* arranges to observe a large and complicated number of magical performances just after the worship of the deity is publicly made. A special seat is prepared at the left side of the altar of the deity. Three skulls belonging to human child, jackal and iguana are placed in front of the special seat with vermilion marks on these. Three pots of *handia* are offered to each of the skulls. The *Deyashi* wears a red cloth and his forehead is distinctly smeared

with vermilion and oil. He wears a bead necklace and holds a long trident made of iron. The door of the shrine is closed for some time and all persons go out of it excepting the assistant of *Deyashi*. For about half an hour a number of magical activities are performed which are essential to get the blessings of the goddess throughout the year at the time of treating the *faridis* and also in answering the different questions put forward by the devotees.

After completion of the special magical performances the *Deyashi* requests the Brahmin priest serving the Bauri community to organize the *Yajna* with the direct help of the *graha-charya* of the village. The priest observes Brahminical procedures in the organization of *Yajna*. He offers a sacred thread on the *bari* of the goddess. A number of higher caste influential men of the locality attend the shrine during this *Yajna* performance and observe it from close quarters. The priest offers *Yajna-tilak* to all these persons, while others are served by the assistant of the *Deyashi* with the formal permission of the priest. The *Deyashi* arranges for *prasad* consisting of flattened rice, milk and molasses and he dedicates it to the goddess in presence of the priest. The *prasad* is then served to the attending persons. In the afternoon of the following day some *faridis* and devotees attend the shrine to get medicines and also to be blessed with the kindness of the deity. The immersion ceremony is held in the evening but the fresh idol worshipped the other day is not immersed. As per tradition it is kept in the shrine throughout the year. The idol of the previous year is taken out in a procession and it is immersed in the tank at the western side of the village in the midst of vigorous drum-beating.

At Bhanra Village

The goddess Kali at Bhanra village is similarly worshipped on the new-moon day of *Agrahayana* (November-December). The idol is of similar type and style as in Metela. It is prepared by the *sutradhar* caste of Rajganj village. The *Deyashi* makes all the arrangements for worship. In the organization of the worship of the goddess Kali the *Deyashi* takes help and co-operation from his fellow villagers and the Brahmin priest is informed previously who takes the responsibility in bringing *bari* from Bakreswar river flowing by the side of the village. It is a very

brief ceremony. The priest accompanied by the *Deyashi* and his assistants starts for the river about half an hour before the actual worship. They are guided by the team of drummers and followed by a number of villagers. On reaching the river the priest makes some offerings to the deity of water and invokes the goddess Kali to come with them to the shrine. He then immerses the empty earthen pot in water which becomes readily filled up. It is taken over the head and the drummers are asked to proceed to the shrine. The *bari* is ceremonially received by the women of the *Deyashi* family through traditional procedures. After placing the *bari* in front of the altar of the goddess the priest instructs the *Deyashi* to complete the essential preparations of worship. The deity is ceremonially worshipped by the priest though the *Deyashi* manages everything. During worship the priest follows the traditional Brahminical way but side by side there are ample of indigenous non-sanskritic elements. The *Yajna* performance is supervised by the priest in a sanctified way; the *Deyashi* is not allowed to do anything in connection with this orthodox performance. He brings with him his nephew who helps in the organization of the *Yajna*. The priest does not interfere into the performances, like 'possession' by the deity, offering of rice-beer to the deity and treating the *faridis* as well as giving suggestions and advice to the devotees. These are completely the spheres of the *Deyashi* and are carefully performed in an indigenous way. But the offerings of *santijal* to the participants is conducted by the priest through the recitation of sanskrit *mantras*.

The devotees from different villages come with their votive offerings early in the morning. They bring rice, vegetables, flattened rice, milk, molasses, betel, betel-nut and vermilion. These are taken by the family members of the *Deyashi* and are kept in the shrine in the different containers. In the evening a number of persons are seen to come to the shrine with goats and sheep for dedication to the deity. The *faridis* and devotees are the principal clients of the deity. They are formally received by the *Deyashi* and everybody is honourably treated. A special shelter is arranged at the *natmandir* and other adjacent places to take rest freely. During the different phases of the ceremony they participate whole-heartedly.

After the actual worship and *Yajna* performance the *Deyashi*

offers *prasad* to the deity. The *prasad* is composed of flattened rice, milk and molasses. The attending persons receive *prasad* from the *Deyashi* with due devotion. Then the *Deyashi* becomes ready to be absorbed in deep meditation before the deity. The drummers beat their drums in a particular rhythmic style which stimulates the *Deyashi* to shake his body in a wild manner. Everybody goes nearer to the 'possessed' *Deyashi* as it is considered as a sacred duty to have a look into the nature of possession. Many persons come forward to ask different questions in relation to their own affairs. The assistants of the *Deyashi* put forward some questions in connection with various spheres of worship and general well-being of the village and its inhabitants.

The idol of the previous year is ceremonially immersed in the river on the following evening. The fresh idol is kept in the shrine throughout the year. All the performances relating to the treating of patients, exercising and divinational activities are conducted before this image of the goddess. The immersion ceremony is attended by a large number of persons from different villages when there is a custom to show due regard to the deity during her journey to the river and to receive the "water of blessings" lifted from the river immediately after her immersion.

NOTES

1. During the worship of Dharmaraj the initiation of the *Bhaktyas* is an essential item. Devotees belonging to diverse castes present themselves as ascetics but they are to go through some ceremonial performances in which the village barber takes the leading part. The barber calls at the embankment of a particular tank where all the devotees concerned go through a purificatory ceremony after which they are allowed to present themselves as ascetics of Dharmaraj. The barber shaves the devotees one by one and for this he claims a nominal fee. The devotees who initiate themselves as *Bhaktyas* for the first time offer new napkins to the barber. It is the duty of the barber to look into all the phases of the initiation ceremony here which is generally officiated by the Brahmin priest. The ceremonial shaving of the *Bhaktyas* indicates their entry into the threshold of week-long ritual performances directly connected with Dharmaraj.

2. In the village society there was a popular custom through which subscriptions were collected regularly from the villagers, in cash or in kind, according to the means of the particular persons. This system is still prevalent in many villages of the region and it is still maintaining the age-old tradition. At the time of girl's marriage in the village the bride's party together with other fellow-villagers demand a lump sum amount from the guardians of the bridegroom. If the latter refuse to pay the amount, the villagers do not hesitate to take a stern attitude against the bridegroom party. They generally make an attempt to disorder the vehicles by which the party has visited the village. Sometimes other attempts of similar nature are made and the men of the bridegroom's side find no other alternative but to pay the required amount after mutual agreement with the villagers. The total amount of money thus raised in this way is kept in the custody of the traditional headman which are spent for the general welfare of the village. In the preparation work of the public places and in thatching the roofs of the village shrines the marocha money is extensively used. Sometimes these are given to the highly distressed people of the village who fail to perform funeral ceremonies of their relatives or fail to provide any shelter during heavy shower of rain due to financial stringency.
3. The ceremonial bath of the representative of Dharmaraj—Baneswar—is performed with great pomp and eclat. It is regarded as an opportune moment and the devotees consider it as one of the pious activities to observe the ceremony. The whole ceremony is conducted by the *Bhaktyas*. The *mul-Bhaktya* fetches water from the tank with the help of a new earthen pot and then pours it on the body of Baneswar which is placed at the *ghat* of the tank. In some places a few *Bhaktyas*, headed by the *mul-Bhaktya*, get hold of Baneswar and dip it in the water of the tank. People present there rejoice at the holy scene, the female devotees blow conch shell and make the sound of *ulu*. *Banamo* water is believed to have a deep fertility effect.
4. Representative of Dharmaraj. A piece of flattened wooden slab, generally 4 to 5 feet in length, which is provided with a number of large iron nails at one end of it is everything about Baneswar. A large number of ceremonies are connected with Baneswar and the *Bhaktyas* and devotees consider it as the replica of Dharmaraj. Of these, *Banamo* is the most important one. During the whole ceremony of Dharma worship Baneswar becomes the constant companion of the *Bhaktyas* and every step of the festival is observed in front of it. It is the custom for the *Bhaktyas* to offer sacred thread to the iron nails of Baneswar before taking the same for themselves. Sometimes a number of fruits like mango, pineapple, guava, etc., are pierced on the nails. It may have got some relationship with the *banfoda* or piercing of scrap iron rods on the body of the *Bhaktyas*.
5. There is a special performance when all the *Bhaktyas* lie down on

their backs over a thick layer of prickly nightshade that have been spread over the floor in front of the temple of Dharmaraj. The Brahmin priest who comes from a distance walks on the chests of the laid down *Bhaktyas* and ultimately enters into the temple. This signifies the dominance of the Brahmin priest who has brought down the *Bhaktyas* of Dharmaraj under his feet and reaches Dharmaraj to officiate the different performances relating to his worship.

6. Carrying of fire on the head and other parts of body of the *Bhaktyas*. Generally one *Bhaktya* is selected to carry the *agniban*; he is accompanied by his fellow-*Bhaktyas* to the house of the blacksmith who, as per tradition, decorate the body of the *Bhaktya* concerned with rags dipped in kerosene oil. These are tied at the iron rods projected at different directions from his body. The *mul-Bhaktya* applies fire to these rags and all begin to proceed towards the shrine. The fire is frequently blazed by the addition of incense powder thrown by the *mul-Bhaktya*. The dancing of the *agniban*-carrying *Bhaktya* becomes a very enjoyable scene in the nightly atmosphere of the village.
7. Piercing of the tongue with an iron rod, one centimetre in diameter, smeared with *ghee* (clarified butter). The length of this rod varies from one to one and a half metre. The *Bhaktyas* are to bring these rods with them which are prepared by the village blacksmith on usual payment. These are kept under the custody of the *Bhaktyas* concerned throughout the year. On the day before *banfoda* ceremony these are taken out, cleaned and then smeared with *ghee*. The *jivban* is pierced by the village blacksmith when the *Bhaktyas* approach him one by one. This ceremony is performed either on the embankment of the tank where the *banamo* has been observed or in the *natmandir* in front of the temple of Dharmaraj.
8. It is taken by one of the *Bhaktyas*. First of all, an iron helmet is placed on the head on which there is an incense burner fixed to it. Two iron rods with one centimetre in diameter and one metre in length are pierced through the flesh of both sides of the abdomen. These two rods are then tied crosswise. The ends of the rods are provided with lighted torches prepared out of rags dipped in kerosene oil. A flambeau is placed on the incense burner. When the operation is completed, the *Bhaktya*, carrying *navaratna ban*, is asked to dedicate himself at the feet of Dharmaraj and then he is set free to dance through the village roads to reach the temple. During his journey to the temple of Dharmaraj he is followed by the *Bhaktyas* with *jivban*, the drum-beaters and numerous spectators belonging to all ages and sexes. It is customary that the *Bhaktya* carrying *navaratna ban* should be an upright, responsible and painstaking person as it is believed that Dharmaraj himself takes his seat on the body of the *Bhaktyas* concerned as soon as he dedicates himself in the name of Dharmaraj.
9. After the release of the *bans* from the bodies of the *Bhaktyas* they are asked to take their seats on the ground in front of the temple

door of Dharmaraj. At this time the *Bhaktyas* loudly praise in the name of Dharmaraj. The Brahmin priest then comes out of the temple and walks over the shoulders of the sitting *Bhaktyas* with the help of his two Brahmin assistants so that he may not fall down during his journey on the bodies of the *Bhaktyas*. The latter persons hold the hands of the priest from both the sides—right and left. They walk on the ground whereas the priest moves over the sitting *Bhaktyas*. This ceremony is known as '*jangal*'. The term '*jangal*' is believed to have been derived from the Santali word '*janga*', the meaning of which is leg. So the application of legs of the Brahmin priest on the shoulders of the *Bhaktyas* has been termed as '*jangal*' ceremony. This ceremony also signifies the infiltration of the trend of Brahminization into the age-old indigenous custom. The *banfoda* ceremony is strictly a primitive feature. Though the *Bhaktyas* sincerely and seriously observe the ceremony relating to physical penances and they find ample opportunities to offer themselves before Dharmaraj but at the next moment they are ceremonially forced to be trampled down by the Brahmin priest which is nothing but the surrender of the indigenous non-Brahmin tradition at the feet of the Brahminical procedures.

10. A hot spring situated at the northern side of the temple of Bakranath Mahadev in Bakreswar. Practically the water that is accumulated from *Brahmakunda* is known as *Swetganga*. It is said that *Swetganga* has been named after a king named Swet of Mangalkot in the district of Burdwan. He was a very pious man and dedicated himself to the service of Lord Siva. His selfless service as well as high devotion moved Lord Siva who was pleased to offer him a boon. The King Swet wanted nothing but he placed his desire that the spring should be named after him. It was immediately granted. During worship of Siva and other deities in this religious complex the water from *Swetganga* is extensively used.
11. The water that has been specially sanctified by the application of incantations during the worship of gods and goddesses. It is kept in a small stone bowl or copper vessel and with the help of a brush made of *kusha* grass it is sprinkled over the devotees with the uttering of words "Om Santi, Om Santi, Om Santi". It is believed that this water, if taken with due regard, has an immediate effect on the body and mind of the persons receiving it. It refreshes the mind and protects the body from all sorts of evil effects. This is why the devotees rush to the priest and kneel down before him, in order to keep the legs concealed, to get a few drops of *santijal* on their persons.
12. The feeding of the *Bhaktyas* is known by this term, which is held at the end of the ceremony. The *Bhaktyas* pay house to house visit with Baneswar and collect rice, pulses and vegetables as per means of the family concerned. Sometimes they go to the stall-holders of the fair connected with the festival and collect subscriptions in cash or in

kinds. All are used in the feeding ceremony of the *Bhaktyas*. The chopped off heads and one of the left hind legs of the sacrificed goats are brought from the shrine of Dharmaraj for cooking. The *Bhaktyas* employ themselves right from fetching water up to the cooking of different items and all these are done in a body irrespective of castes affiliations. All of them take meals sitting in a row and at this time they treat themselves as the representatives of Dharmaraj and nothing else. The *Bhaktya-bhojan* becomes the centre of attraction of many devotees. It is regarded as a pious activity to see god-affiliated persons sitting side by side after forgetting all sorts of worldly differences and social restrictions.

13. Literally it means complainant. It seems that the persons suffering from different diseases or fallen in dangerous situations come to put their complaints before the village deities who are regarded as saviours, well-wishers and resorts of the helpless. Their complaints are ceremonially received by the *Deyashi* for onward transmission to the deity concerned. Then the latter receives divine instructions by which he is able to prescribe various medicines to the ailing persons or to show the actual way through which the troubles may be wiped out.
14. A small earthen or metal pot which is filled up with water. It is prepared by pouring water in the pot and then a small mango twig is placed over the mouth. On the body of the pot three or five vermilion marks are put by the finger. It is then placed on the *tulsi-manch*. When the ceremonial procession with any god or goddess passes through the village paths, the housewives take these *puṛnaghot* and proceed towards the procession in order to give a respectful reception. The *puṛnaghot* is always shown with the accompaniment of the sound of the conch shell and *ulu*. *Puṛnaghot* signifies an auspicious sign. It is customary for the people to see the *puṛnaghot* on the eve of starting any journey or going to perform any auspicious activity.
15. Ceremonial going round a tree on the eve of worship of the village deity. Altogether eight women take part in it. One of them holds a brass pitcher filled up with water and the other one takes the charge of a bamboo spool provided with new thread. During the *gachbera* ceremony of Mangal Chandi of Khairadihi a *pipal* tree is selected at the outskirts of the village. The *Deyashi* carries Mangal Chandi and he leads the procession. An umbrella is held over the head of the deity by the *sutradhar*. On reaching the *pipal* tree all begin to stroll round it when the woman holding the spool begins to unteel the thread to wind round the tree. It is customary to make round the tree for seven times. The *gachbera* performance is not only present in this locality during the worship of village deities but it is also seen at the time of marriage ceremony of certain communities specially among the *Subarnabaniks*. On the previous day of marriage ceremony the village deity Manasa or Chandi is ceremonially carried to

the house and she is placed there for eight days. The *Deyashi* arranges the daily worship of her. The bride and the bridegroom are to observe fast for the day when *gachbera* performance is held as per above procedure.

16. *Bari* means water. On the eve of worship of any deity the *bari* from a particular tank as per tradition of the locality, should be brought ceremonially in a new earthen vessel specially prepared by the potter caste. The priests or the *Deyashis* accompanied by their assistants and a large crowd go to the tank and perform a brief religious ceremony there. After showing proper respect to the tank the particular god or goddess is ceremonially invited to exert his or her influence on the vessel that is being dipped into the water. The drummers begin to beat their drums in a wild manner which changes the whole atmosphere of the locality. The incense burners make a heavy cloud of smoke and the attending people anxiously wait for the moment when the filled up vessels are put on the heads of the carriers of *bari*. When it is done, all start proceeding towards the temple. The bringing of *bari* is regarded as a very auspicious ceremony and the people believe that the god or goddess enters the village to be worshipped by the devotees. After the worship is performed, the *bari* is ceremonially immersed in the same tank which signifies the return of the god or goddess to his or her original abode.
17. The vow-takers are known by the term '*baratee*'. In Shibpur village a large number of women come forward as *baratees* during the worship of the goddess Kali. They keep fasting for the day and in the evening these *baratees* accompany the male *Deyashi* to the rivulet at the outskirts of the village for bringing *bari* in their own small earthen or metal pots. The womenfolk observe this ceremony for the general welfare of the family. They have got no particular connection with the bringing of *bari* for the goddess Kali and other deities. They take the *bari* to their homes. But it is expected that they should accompany the main procession and should be possessed by the deities while returning to the shrine. The possessed *baratees* are attended by their own family members.
18. The goddess Kali of Shibpur though worshipped in an indigenous way by the lower section of the people is devoid of any kind of animal sacrifice. Sometimes sugarcane sticks are sacrificed before her. It is seen from different behaviour patterns that the *Deyashi* of the goddess Kali, Nepal Bagdi and his ancestors, came in direct touch with the Sinha family of the village in course of agricultural activities and other allied economic affairs. The Sinha family is a true Vaishnavite and the members of which live in close proximity with the Vaishnav god—Shyamchand. During the worship of the goddess Kali ample quantity of *sidha*, i.e. rice, vegetables, mustard oil, *ghee*, betel, betel-nut, new napkin, etc., is sent to the shrine. The Sinha family and the Bagdi family in question have, in course of time, been tied up in a very good patron-client relationship centering

round the agricultural fields. Probably the Vaishnavite attitude has been infiltrated into the worshipping pattern of the goddess Kali. Animal sacrifice has been stopped under the direct influence of the dominant caste. At times goats and sheep are sacrificed in the name of Bhairab, but these are done at the backside of the shrine to maintain the traditional sanctity.

19. A large *chandmala* or a decorated garland of sponge-wood (*sola*) is offered by the Sinha family of Shibpur to the goddess Kali. It is presented to the deity on the eve of her worship through a particular procedure. This *chandmala* is not immersed with the goddess but is preserved throughout the year. On the eighth day from the immersion of the goddess the straw structure of her is ceremonially taken back to the shrine and is placed on the altar. The womenfolk of the Sinha family along with others give ceremonial reception to the goddess when the *Deyashi* offers the *chandmala* on the straw structure of the goddess Kali. Occasional worship of the goddess is made on this structure with *chandmala* at the different periods of the year.

Folk Medicines and Folk Deities

I

DISEASES are common to every society in all the ages. People at various levels of culture try to combat the troublesome situations arising out of the diseases according to their own recipes which vary from one community to another. From time immemorial people in different parts of the world have been attempting to find out the causes of ailment and thereby engaging themselves in searching the multiple ways of curing the diseases. In primitive and rural societies an indigenous pattern of medicine has been developed which tries to cope with the troubles arising out of the influence of diseases. Mention may be made that this indigenous pattern of medicine is exclusively influenced by the traditional knowledge and practice, customs and habits, charms and incantations, as well as continuous process of trial and error backed by experience through generations. The body of beliefs and concepts oriented by the cultural patterns and religious sentiments, economy and moral ideas, social values and medical viewpoints altogether constitute the indigenous pattern of recipes. It has been seen from various perspectives that this therapy is primarily centred round the observations on the nature and behaviour of animals stricken by various functional disorders. It may be noted that this indigenous pattern of therapy is conditioned by the age-old cultural traditions of the society concerned and it is necessarily rooted to the very philosophy of life of the people. This

indigenous socio-ritualistic traditional pattern of medicine is known by the term 'folk medicine'.¹

The systematic and analytical study of the indigenous concepts of diseases and the nature of application and effect of folk medicine has got an intrinsic value in the sphere of public health and hygiene. The medico-socio-ritualistic analysis² of the nature and extent of the folk medicines would unfold a scientific device to evaluate the integration of folk life with the system of folk medicine. It has been pointed out through different discussions that there are two parallel traditions throughout the history of medicine. These have been recognized as (a) the magico-religious or folk tradition and (b) the secular scientific tradition. During the recent period among advanced people the secular scientific tradition is in the ascendant over folk tradition, but at the same time it is to be noted that folk medicine is still exerting tremendous influence in rural society. The folk medicine is characterized by the application of magic, charms, amulets, exorcism together with some herbal preparations; whereas the basis of the secular scientific medicine is research-oriented biochemical as well as physio-psychical interactional patterns. Various studies conducted on folk medicine support the view put forward in this context in relation to the central theme of discussion on folk medicine. Gould's study in a North Indian village pin-points folk medicine as a complex assortment of common sense remedies and supernaturalistic ritualism which has grown up over time in an effort to cope with sickness in a systematic and predictable manner. . . . it is a body of traditionally sanctioned, ready-made formulae, interwoven with the supernatural, to be restored to in time of need (1957 : 507-8).

Folk medicine has a traditional background of its own. From time immemorial various spheres of folk medicine have been developing in the different corners of the world. The development of folk medicine has always taken place in the background of the cultural settings and, as a natural consequence, the system of folk medicine has focused a broad horizon of the cultural matrix of the people concerned. There are many instances in the field of modern allopathic treatment as regards the borrowing of the idea of disease and the curative effect from the domain of folk medicine. Owing to the similarity of approach to the diseased persons and identical intention regarding the

benevolent activities a close link exists between the folk and modern scientific medicines. The trained practitioners in both the fields of treatment of human diseases work on the same principle though in different ways. Paul Fejoz, a reputed worker in the field of folk medicine, finds no practical difference between the folk healer and the scientific medical practitioner. He advocates, "both the physician and the *shaman*³ are learned men. Both of them are subject to rigid discipline and a prodigious amount of education for many years. Both are under rules of professional ethics. Both are usually respected members or leaders of their communities" (1959 : 22). But the ways adopted by them strikingly differ from each other. The folk practitioner tries to find out the cause of the disease through magic and supernatural assistance, whereas his scientific colleague attempts to unfold the cause through scientific principles based on the study of anatomy, physiology, pathology, etc. The former consults the activities of the supernal world which is beyond the reach of natural science and the latter's attempts are centered round the activities of human body which follow the worldly principles in its workings.

It may be the fact that some queer practices in folk medicine have repelled the scientists from the sphere of folk practitioners organizing their works through generations. But actually no boundary line can be drawn between the two traditions. There are so many medications, which are in general use of the scientific medical practitioners of the present period, have originated from the folk medicine. J.W. Dodds observes, "Modern medicine discovered important drugs in common use in primitive cultures, such as the Cinchona of the Peruvian Indians, and the Curare of the Amazon. Primitive peoples, from the Papuans to the Africans to the Indians of the United States, have always used steam and vapour baths for rheumatic pains. Massage was a standard therapy in Malanesia, intended to drive the malicious spirits from the body; but whatever the theory of disease might be, the results are the same as in modern physiotherapy" (1959 : 43-44). There are several instances like these. Modern medical science has, no doubt, made tremendous progress in the different parts of the world. This progress is exclusively based on the inventions and discoveries in relation to the human body in the perspective of natural science. But in

spite of its speedy advance it has not yet been able to nullify all the variegated experience that have been accumulated through a gradual process over a long span of time. It can easily be said that no conflict exists between the folk and scientific tradition; a practical collaboration conditioned by unbiased mind between these would very naturally unfold a new horizon of human welfare.

In Europe and United States the study of folk medicine is provided with a fruitful background. In a recent study Don Yoder has observed that "the study of folk medicine has followed the same general pattern as other aspects of folk culture, first the literary or philosophical approach, followed by the sociological or functional approach" (1977 : 195). The collection of charms was highly practised by the eighteenth century scholars of these countries but their analysis was principally confined to the antiquity and linguistic value. In Europe the study of magic and medicine was initiated by Frazer and its various aspects were brought to light through vast data collected from different parts of the country. In latter period this tradition was followed by many scholars. In this connection, the study and analysis of folk medicine that appeared in two different books based on concrete essays in relation to the theory and practice of folk medicine deserve mention. The first book is the outcome of a symposium at Stockholm and is edited by Carl-Herman Tillhagen, whereas the second one is edited by Elfriede Grabner. Both the books are provided with invaluable data and their successive analysis based on folk-medical viewpoints.⁴

In the United States of America the study of folk medicine has been accelerated by the direct intervention of the Journal of American Folklore which began to publish so many articles on the topic in broad perspectives. W.D. Hand published his celebrated works, in two volumes, entitled "The Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore" and "Popular Beliefs and Superstitions from North Carolina" (1961-64) in which various ethnic and regional treatments were focused. A large number of works on folk medicine has been conducted under Pennsylvania Research Society of which the works by Lick and Brendles as well as by Brendle and Unger deserve mention.⁵ W.M. Hudson edited a book on the Healers of Los Olmos in 1951. But in the sphere of American folk-medical research the

works on the "Dictionary of American popular beliefs and superstitions" edited by W.D. Hand, open up a new horizon. This national project on folk-medical research pin-points the development of particular interest of the scholars of the United States in this line.

The glorious existence and workings of folk medicine side by side with scientific medicines in Russia impel us to go deep into the actual mystery. Konrennoff has conducted a broad-based survey on folk medicine in Russia and in course of study he has felt, "that religious faith-healers have largely disappeared underground, but not the dedicated and knowledgeable folk medicine practitioners. And even though the Soviet Union has more doctors per capita than any other country, folk medicine has not lost its popularity and prestige, particularly among older citizens" (1970: 6). He also asserts that the recent attempts by some reputed medical institutes in the scientific evaluation of the native folk medicine in the vast area over Siberia are to be welcomed. A large number of trained medical practitioners are being sent to the remote corners of the country to collect the vast treasures of native medicines ranging from medicinal herbs to the queer customs. The practice of folk medicine, though these have exerted considerable influence on folk-life, is on the verge of extinction. It is high time to re-discover these findings based on age-old experience and also established by the overall dependence of a vast majority of people through the ages. Mention may be made that in Russia some organized efforts are being made to evaluate the so-called "unscientific" practices of the native practitioners. The recent findings of the Soviet scientist, Dr. Alexander Dogel, opens up a new vista in the sphere of folk medicine. He has studied the "talking away" methods of the native practitioners in the case of relieving pains and has found out that certain timbrel⁶ of voices work internally in diminishing pains and also these lower the cardiac activity which ultimately help stop external haemorrhage. His famous experiments on 'sonic therapy'⁷ or the use of sounds in the treatment of various diseases, advocate the view that certain types of human voices, that are produced in a particular manner, have got profound physiological influence on the body of man. The 'witchcraft-medicine' popularly practised by the

Shamans in Siberia is extensively based on sonic treatment. The melodious tune of the tambourine used by the Shaman and his rhythmic voice produced through the singing of devotional songs collectively bring efficacious influence on the physiological change in the body. In this connection, it may be pointed out that the subject-matter of the large number of incantations and numerous prayers that are performed at the time of treating a patient have got no curative value, but the particular type of sound, that produced through these, plays the essential role. The particular rhythmic sound can only be produced by the trained practitioners whose number is very naturally limited.

Therefore, a very close link, though internal, exists between the folk and modern scientific medicines. The queer customs and so-called 'baseless' procedures adopted by the folk healers have got some curative value when analysed in the perspective of scientific knowledge of the present period. It is for this reason that many science-oriented modern scholars working on folk medicine are of opinion that the folk healers' indigenous attempts should not be kept aside after branding these as 'unscientific'. The very intention of the scientific research is to unveil the mystery and not to entitle any unstudied or uninvestigated thing or happening as 'unscientific'. It is the pious duty of the modern scientific research to investigate into the various attempts of the folk practitioners in the light of adequate scientific knowledge. It is probable that there may be some secrets in the different phases of folk medicine that have been and are being taken advantage of by the people through millenia, and the exploration of those 'secrets' would be the pre-eminent task of modern scientific research under the patronage of which the modern scientific medicines have been considerably developed. There cannot be any denying of the fact that the systematic and analytical study of folk medicine would still make substantial contribution to the sphere of scientific medicine. The unprejudiced collaboration between the folk and scientific medicines can be of tremendous benefit to human society. It is for this reason Alland has categorically indicated the good deal of researches that are being conducted in the sphere of medical anthropology have deep concern with so-called folk models, *i.e.*, the analysis of behavioural

rules from the background of the native system itself (1970: 9). Kitima's work on the traditional African medicine, conducted recently, deserves special mention as it explores the nature of the traditional healers who "are psychiatrists, and psychotherapists. They have immense wisdom, sagaciousness, expertise and knowledge regarding the African psyche, mentality, society, tradition and social problems" (1976: 414). In most of the societies of the world "there is specialist who treats illness, injury and disease and quite frequently this person corresponds to the leader of religious practices, whatever he or she may be called" (Grollig, 1976: 5). These characteristic features that have grown up centering round medicine and anthropology, as a natural consequence, give rise to a distinct collaborated perspective formed by medical and social scientists. From his Nigerian experience Onoge has stressed that the collaboration between these two spheres "has placed a heavy premium on the conclusions and directives proffered by social scientists" (1977: 220). Sociological orientation of various problems of health and disease has received wide circulation in the spheres of research and welfare activities.

The roots of Indian folk medicine go into the remote antiquity. In *Atharva Veda*,⁸ numerous examples of folk medicines are to be found and these are based on magical practices, ritualistic performances including giving of amulets associated with the application of herbal preparations. The givers of herbal medicines should have been well-equipped with the magico-religious procedures centering round certain supernatural powers. The other classics of ancient India like Kautilya's *Arthasastra*, *Ayurvedic Samhitas* of Charaka and Susruta,⁹ etc., are replete with variegated instances of folk medicine which have gradually been descended down in later period with traditional viewpoints. The folk medicines in India, like other countries of the world, have been integrated into the cultural pattern. Firth's extensive study on the concepts of health and disease in the background of acculturation reveals that numerous socio-cultural factors play the essential rôles in the attempt of diagnosing and curing diseases. According to him, in Western society, medicine is more closely associated with technology than with religion, whereas in the oriental society the religious attitudes exert great influence on

the system of medicine. But it is to be noted that in Western societies religion sometimes comes to the domain of medical practices.

However, Indian society presents a very interesting picture of integration of the religious beliefs with the concepts and cure of diseases. In rural settings all the diseases are taken as the result of influence exerted by some divine powers—both benevolent and malevolent. This particular idea gave rise to the development of a large number of cure deities to help solve problems of health and life. The faith and belief attitude system that has centered round these cure deities and their *Deyashis* depict a bright picture of human adjustment with the natural as well as supernatural world. Medicine has been regarded by the social scientists as a social institution. In village societies the folk medicine has developed through the ages exerting far-reaching influence on the value attitude system and total cultural setting of the people concerned. Therefore, the systematic study on the nature and extent of folk medicine in the perspective of rural life would unveil various interesting features of rural societies. The system of folk medicine is so well-integrated into the life and activities of the people that its overall study would help in understanding the diverse socio-cultural forces and interactional patterns in their proper perspectives. As a land of villages, India specially deserves the broadbased and analytical study of folk medicines for two special reasons—(a) through a systematic study on the nature, functioning and practitioners of the folk medicines in relation to the diverse patients a clear-cut background of cultural heritage in relation to health and disease would be brought to light; (b) the social and cultural factors influencing health and disease are to be brought out through a close study of the behaviour-pattern of the people for the interest of bringing any sort of innovation in the community concerned. The present chapter of this treatise is expected to throw discernible light on the pattern of diagnosing and prognosing the diseases by the *Deyashis* of the folk deities on whom the rural people solely depend in every step of their life. The different concepts of etiology of disease, the respective folk deities and various *Deyashis* would collectively provide an integrated aspect of rural health, disease and folk beliefs. This particular field of study very naturally contributes

some valuable and fundamental materials for the joint work of the medical practitioners, the anthropologists and the public health workers. The renowned medical historian-anthropologist, Ackerknecht (1942) opines that medicine should be studied as a form of social institution. He has rightly remarked that the different concepts of disease and health of the folk contribute essential materials to the core of folk culture. W.H.R. Rivers, the pioneer exponent in the field of medicine, magic and religion, observed in his thought-provoking work that "Medicine. . . is a term for a set of social practices by which man seeks to direct and control a specific group of natural phenomena, viz., those especially affecting man himself, which so influence his behaviour as to unfit him for the normal accomplishment of his physical and social functions—phenomena which lower his vitality and tend towards death" (1924: 4). Very little work has so far been conducted on the cultural aspects of health and hygiene in India in comparison to the vastness of the problem.¹⁰ It cannot be denied that the programme of public health and hygiene as well as operation of the medical mission require a thorough understanding of the various socio-ritual organizations which control the movement of the community concerned and also of the cultural models working exclusively on the philosophy of life.

The social and cultural factors have now been accepted by all concerned as very much important in the field of medicine and public health programme. Some stresses, though far from sufficient, are being laid in India to consider these socio-cultural features before implementing any particular programme of public health and hygiene. Carstair's study on "Medicine and Faith in Rural Rajasthan" highlights a very fascinating account on the differences between viewpoints of the physician and the villager in respect of the principles of etiology, the role of faith in curing and different conceptions of the role of the physicians. In course of an intensive study in a village he observes that "public health workers will have to formulate their measures so that they can be linked with the old teachings, and above all, must aim to enlist the support of the leaders of village opinion" (Paul, 1955: 134). Marriott's observations in Kishan Garhi, a North Indian village, on the position of Western medicine amongst the villagers pin-point the fact that the practice of

medicine in rural society is largely controlled by the factors like kinship, caste and the outside world. He has gone deep into the pattern of indigenous medicine and has shown how the diverse roots of it pierced through the core of the society and culture. On the other hand, the specialist of Western medicine is considered as alien and due to his nature of treatment and medicine he fails to establish any relationship with his clients. This situation leads to a phenomenon of dissociation. Several types of contrasts and conflicts between the roles played by indigenous and Western medical practitioners have given rise to obstacles which acted against the spread of Western medicine. He reiterates, "the successful establishment of effective medicine here appears to depend largely on the degree to which scientific medical practice can divest itself of certain Western cultural accretions and clothe itself in the social homespun of the Indian village" (Paul, 1955: 267-68). In this connection, Hasan's (1967) study on Chinnaura, a village in U.P., deserves mention. He has focused considerable light on the concepts of etiology and illness as maintained by the village folk. He has discussed the three types of medical systems—primitive medicine, based on magico-religious theory; scientific medicine, based on the rational methods of diagnosis and treatment; and lastly, the folk medicine, in which both physical and supernatural methods of treatment co-exist. The roles of the specialists in these three spheres have been evaluated in the perspective of the social and physical environment, customs and traditions centering round personal hygiene, food habits and food taboos and doctor-patient relationship. In course of his discussions he has traced a direct relationship pattern between health and cultural traditions constituted by customs and practices, beliefs, values and religious taboos.

While supporting whole-heartedly the concepts of health and disease the present author takes up a different canvas of depicting the pattern of folk medicine centralized on the socio-ritual traditions in the background of the village deities. Multifarious castes, heterogeneous classes and different religious groups approach the village deities for getting recipe for curing the diseases. A well-knit social fabric is to be found spread over such deities, who control the health and disease of mankind. The rigidity of the caste system, the utter differences in classes

and religion cut across the age-old rural tradition to discover a concerted socio-ritual understanding. Diseases are coeval with human society; the establishment of village deities is also rooted into the hoary antiquity. In course of day-to-day living these two factors had been intermingled with each other—man began to rely on the village deities for the cure as well as prevention of diseases and that reliance ultimately gave rise to a medico-ritual perspective in the cultural setting of man. As this perspective is full of beliefs, customs, superstitions, social and moral values, folk ways and mores, it deserves both implicit and explicit expositions in the sociological background.

II

In rural societies of India a large number of deities are to be met with who are reputed to be the curer of diseases. The very idea that diseases are caused due to the wrath of some supernatural powers has given rise to disease gods and goddesses. In some parts of rural India this particular idea is so dominating and so widespread that the life-activities of the rural folk can easily be focused through the perspective of the nature of these folk deities and their propitiations. The concept of deities in human civilization is a very old phenomenon and naturally the systematic analysis of the various thought-patterns centering round these deities would unveil the memorable past along with the momentous present. We have already discussed the genesis and influence of the various village deities in the region of study in question and now we shall take up an analytical survey of these deities against the background of their role in the cure of diseases. It would be seen, in course of discussions, that these folk deities act as the guardians, the saviours and the advisers during the period of crisis. Men and women throng to these deities at the different periods of the year with a view to obtain a remedy for their diseases and also to get rid of the demon of disease.

The five different types of deities so far studied from the ten villages are regarded as the specialists for treatment and cure of various diseases. It has been noted that each of these deities has its own traditional background in relation to the particular diseases to be treated which is very naturally influenced by oral traditions. In course of study of the five deities a systematic

attempt has been made to throw discernible light on the folk beliefs centering round the cause and cure of the diseases. The universal folk beliefs as regards the cause of diseases can be summarized as follows. According to the rural folk, good health is the special gift of God. It is strongly believed that the life of a person is controlled by so many interlacing factors conditioned by supernatural influences. Sickness and death are, in all circumstances, regarded as the result of improper acts done by the man concerned (Iswaran, 1968: 91). The concept of *papa* (sin) and *punya* (virtue) is very much prevalent in the minds of rural folk and they whole-heartedly support the theory that the *papa* brings disaster to human life, whereas the *punya* is the giver of prosperity. From an extensive study on the ten villages in this region diverse concepts of diseases have been gathered which can be systematically arranged like the following:

- (i) Diseases caused by natural agencies,
- (ii) Diseases caused by supernatural agencies,
- (iii) Diseases caused by human agencies.

These three principal categories had long been enunciated by Rivers (1924: 7-8). It may still be taken as the universal

TABLE 6.1 : Diseases Caused by Different Agencies

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- (i) *Diseases caused by natural agencies*
 - (a) Environmental conditions.
 - (b) Excessive labour.
 - (c) Irregular and polluted food.
 - (d) Sexual intemperance.
 - (e) Effect of germs.
 - (ii) *Diseases caused by supernatural agencies*
 - (a) Anger of various deities due to wrong done to them.
 - (b) Imperfect activities in the previous life or *karmaphal*.
 - (c) Evil spirits.
 - (d) Planetary influences.
 - (e) Violation of customary rules.
 - (iii) *Diseases caused by human agencies*
 - (a) Sorcery.
 - (b) Evil eye, evil mouth and evil touch.
 - (c) Witchcraft.

thought pattern in the causation of diseases. From a large quantity of data collected through personal field investigation an attempt has been made to sub-divide these main categories which, as a natural consequence, are influenced by the regional variations conditioned by the variegated socio-cultural life and activities (see Table 6.1).

These factors may not necessarily be treated as the watertight compartments at the time of finding out the etiology of disease in relation to the rural folk. Diseases may be caused due to one or multiple reasons. Before starting for evaluating the medico-social atmosphere in the rural society in the perspective of the village deities it would be worthwhile to point out, in brief, the essential features of the individual causes of diseases as are conceived by the people of the region under study.

I. Diseases Caused by Natural Agencies

(a) *Environmental Conditions*

Man is surrounded by the physical environment which exerts influences on him from the different sides. The exposure to the excessive cold weather or rain may cause ailments. Similarly, during the hottest season the scorching sun may bring illness to human body.

(b) *Excessive Labour*

The body of man has got certain limitations though these vary from person to person. It is believed that excessive hard work causes injurious effect to the body which gradually becomes sick.

(c) *Irregular and Polluted Food*

Food is the essential factor for the sustenance of the body. But it should be pure and must be taken in a regular fashion. Impure food materials bring disaster in the internal organs of the body. Excessive delay in taking food causes irregularities in the bodily organs which ultimately result various types of diseases.

(d) *Sexual Intemperance*

The sexual relation between husband and wife is governed by various social obligations. If in any case these are neglected severe catastrophe would result. This social tyranny is ultimately transmitted to the individual mental set-up thereby affecting the bodily conditions. Over-indulgence in sexual activities is regarded as the source of mental as well as physical breakdown.

(e) *Effect of Germs*

Some diseases are essentially caused by certain harmful germs which are present in the air, water or in some food materials. These are also carried by many insects like mosquito, flies, etc. When these germs enter in the body, some kind of internal reaction takes place in the internal bodily parts which ultimately result sickness. But this particular idea, subscribed by the rural folk, should be considered as the influence of the modern educated people residing inside the region of study.

II. Diseases Caused by Supernatural Agencies

(a) *Anger of Various Deities*

It is a widespread idea that the deities who are residing in and around the villages bring calamities to human life through the infliction of diseases if they are ill-treated or even overlooked by the villagers. The diseases caused by the anger of supernatural powers are variegated. The role of deities in the causation and cure of diseases is very old and tradition-bound. The diseases caused by the deities may be individual or village-based. When the various types of epidemics break out in the villages, it is believed that the wrath of certain deities has fallen upon the rural communities as a whole due to some common wrong done to the deity concerned.

(b) *Actions in the Previous Life*

In the philosophy of life in India there is special and valuable role of the life after death. Man is liable to take birth at the end of each life and his activities in the previous life are very much taken into account in determining his position in the next life. If a person commits a sin in his life, he would face consequences in the form of incurable diseases in his life after death.

This particular concept is known by the term '*karmaphal*' or the result of one's actions. An individual would be rewarded in the after life if he leads pious life in the present existence. Similarly, a sinner would be put into severe difficulties in the life after death. There are some diseases like leprosy, deformed limbs, blindness and also childlessness which are regarded as the punishment due to *karmaphal* of the previous life.

(c) *Evil Spirits*

The rural folk have wide belief in various types of evil spirits which haunt the entire region. They are beyond the ordinary power of man and their particular nature can never be assessed. But from the mode of behaviour two different types of evil spirits can be detected. One is ancestral spirit and the other one goes by the name of non-human spirits or *dana* (demon). The spirits of the dead ancestors must be propitiated in the usual way, otherwise these may harm the living man. If the dead ancestors are not remembered through ritual, they bring disaster to the family of their descendants. Various types of disease may result due to the misdeeds of these spirits. The death of an unusual nature turn the spirit of the dead into a harmful ghost. If a man is murdered or if he commits suicide, his spirit would invariably turn into a dreadful ghost. The death of a pregnant woman results in the formation of a very deadly ghost which brings afflictions to human life.

The concept of evil spirit in the society of the rural folk is of very old origin, and every body, irrespective of classes, castes and religion subscribes to the fact that these evil spirits are the root cause of a large number of human sufferings that appear in the form of diseases.

(d) *Planetary Influence*

The planets and stars have got direct influence on the various objects on earth, and specially these exert tremendous influence on human being. Owing to the bad influence of any planet or star a man may face disaster or he may prosper in life if the planets and stars are in his favour. The invisible actions and interactions of the celestial world on human life have in due course given rise to an independent discipline of astrology. The rural folk have got deep faith in this astrology and they

believe that some diseases of an individual or of the family members are the result of the evil influence of planets and stars in relation to the life and activities of man differ from person to person as these are determined just at the time of birth of man concerned.

(e) Violation of Customary Rules

In each and every society there are certain customary rules and regulations which are to be obeyed with due reverence for the cause of the man and society. If these are violated, intentionally or unintentionally, severe catastrophes fall on that person. In rural society a large number of taboos are observed. These taboos prohibit certain types of actions as well as control the behaviour-pattern of man in relation to his family members and near relations. The taboos are believed to have got some supernatural sanctions and, therefore, the breaker of taboos and other customary rules would get supernatural punishment. Very naturally this sort of punishment comes in the form of various diseases. Therefore, violation of the customary rules ultimately becomes the cause of different diseases.

III. Diseases Caused by Human Agencies

(a) Sorcery

The rural folk believe that the sorcerers inflict different forms of disease in the body of man through their magical procedures. The sorcerers are very much feared by the common people as they can bring disaster in human life. An enemy can be punished, with the help of a sorcerer, by performing occult activities on him. Owing to such activities the man concerned suffers from a serious illness and if the sickness is continued without any diagnosis and treatment, he would die. When a successful sorcerer exerts his evil influence on a particular person, he becomes suddenly ill, suffers from the loss of appetite and gradually becomes invalid. The sorcerers inflict diseases mainly through imitative and contagious magic.

(b) Evil Eye, Evil Mouth and Evil Touch

Some persons are provided with very bad type of sight and if they cast their glance at any body specially the handsome babies.

or any handsome object, they are to face misfortune. It is believed that due to the influence of the evil eye the persons would suffer from various diseases and the beautiful objects would gradually face demolition. Similarly, there are some persons whose words are believed to be very bad and if uttered in front of a person with the very purpose of doing him harm, the person concerned may get serious type of illness or even face accidents. There are some persons whose touch is considered as very inauspicious. Their personal touch to any healthy person or any favourite object brings an injurious effect to the person or thing concerned. The persons, who are believed to be the possessors of evil eye, evil mouth or evil touch, are carefully avoided by the people, lest they may do harm by creating various diseases.

(c) Witchcraft

Witches are feared in every society because of the fact that they are dangerous to the health of men and women specially of the children. Witchcraft is regarded as an art which is to be acquired through long-term and painstaking training. Generally the witches are females who learn the art from a practising veteran witch and thereby apply it among their neighbours. The witches are believed to possess very powerful but cruel capacity for doing harm to the innocent people. There is common belief that during the dead hours of night the witches come out of their houses naked and visit the shrines of their tutelary deities where they take the vow of offering human blood. If at that time anybody happens to meet them, the person concerned will face misfortune. Witches adopt various means to bring calamity to human life. If a man is attacked by a witch he may develop high fever, vomit blood and gradually becomes bloodless leading to death. Witches are dangerous for the children who may develop various diseases due to the ill-effect of witchcraft.

Rural folk believe that the life of a man or a woman is controlled by the will of God and nothing can be done against His will. Therefore, from the time immemorial the rural folk have been approaching the gods and goddesses to cure all kinds of diseases or any other allied misfortune. This study of village deities in the perspective of the treatment and cure of diseases would include investigations on the following deities (Table 6.2) at the

TABLE 6.2 : List of Village Deities and the Spheres of their Treatment

Name of Deities	Name of villages	Various types of diseases that are treated here	Specified days of giving medicines
1	2	3	4
Chandi	Metela	(a) All types of female diseases, especially the cases of abortion. (b) Measles, Small-pox, Cholera. (c) Cases of Witchcraft. (d) Evil influence exerted by supernatural forces.	Sunday and Tuesday
-Do-	Lauberia	(a) Female disease. (b) Measles, Small-pox, Cholera. (c) Prevention against epidemics. (d) Supernatural influence.	Tuesday
Mangal Chandi	Khairadihi	(a) All kinds of abscess. (b) Carbuncles. (c) Skin diseases like eczema, complicated type of itching.	Tuesday
Dharmaraj	Lakshindarpur	Bone fracture and all kinds of osteological diseases.	Daily
-Do-	Tentulbandh	(a) Female diseases. (b) Ophthalmic disease. (c) Rheumatism.	Sunday
Manasa	Tantipara	Snake bite	Daily
-Do-	Bhanra	(a) Snake bite. (b) Cases of Small-pox and Cholera. (c) Attacked by malevolent spirits.	Sunday
-Do-	Metela	Snake bite.	Daily

(Contd.)

TABLE 6.2—*Contd.*

1	2	3	4
Manasa	Joydev-Keduli	(a) Snake bite. (b) Cases of Small-pox and Cholera. (c) Preventive measures against epidemics. (d) Female disease.	Sunday
Mahadana	Metela	(a) Attack of evil spirits. (b) Witchcrafts.	Sunday
-Do-	Shibpur	(a) Diseases due to supernatural wrath. (b) Evil influence exerted by unembodied powers.	Tuesday and Saturday
Kali	Shibpur	(a) Different kinds of diseases caused by supernatural wrath. (b) Protection against attack of evil spirits.	Tuesday and Saturday
-Do-	Metela	(a) Hysteria and mental troubles. (b) Attack of evil spirits.	

different villages. A few of these deities are considered as very effective, and naturally their shrines are always found crowded. Others are considered less effective, and these deities are only occasionally visited by the patients and their relatives.

These folk deities have got their own priest-cum-medicine men.¹¹ It has already been pointed out that most of the time they belong to the lower caste groups. Also they are regarded as untouchables by the people belonging to the higher castes. But these priest-cum-medicine men or the *Deyashis* enjoy great respect in the life of the whole region despite their very low social rank. Table 6 3 would furnish the names, caste affiliations of the different *Deyashis* and the respective deities they serve.

The *Deyashis* generally hold hereditary positions. But if any body does not have a son, his position may be inherited by any nearest relative. They have to observe some restrictions and must go through certain ordeals before taking initiation. The medicine man teaches therapy as well as the complicated procedure

TABLE 6.3 : Particulars about the Deyashis

Serial No.	Name of the Deyashis	Caste	Village	Deity or Deities they serve
1.	Sanatan Bauri	Bauri	Metela	Chandi/Mahadana/Kali/Manasa.
2.	Abadhut Bagdi	Bagdi	Bhanra	Manasa/Kali.
3.	Rampada Bauri	Bauri	Lauberia	Chandi.
4.	Balaram Das	Tantubaya/ Weaver	Khairadihi	Mangal Chandi
5.	Nityananda Dhibar	Jele/ Fisherman	Tantipara	Manasa
6.	Madan Bagdi	Bagdi	Joydev- Kenduli	Manasa
7.	Nepal Bagdi	Bagdi	Shibpur	Mahadana/Kali
8.	Rasamoy Mondal	Sadgop	Tentulbandh	Dharmaraj
9.	Narayan Mondal	Sadgop	Lakshindarpur	Dharmaraj

of the propitiation of the deities when he feels the time is appropriate. The *guru*, first of all, fixes a date after consulting the indigenous almanac. The disciple has to remain on fast for the whole day and in the evening he is to take vow before the deity concerned to follow all the instructions strictly given by the *guru*. The proper procedure starts during the night. A special arrangement for worship of the deity is made and at that time the elders of the community and the other villagers are called to grace the occasion. A ceremonial initiation of the disciple is performed on that night before the distinguished persons and then the disciple is to undergo a long course of training for propitiation of the deity, to act as mediator before the deity and the common people and to know the art of diagnosing the cause of diseases and their treatment through the deity's grace as well as the application of herbal medicines. This training period varies from one deity to another. It is the general belief that the shouldering of the overall responsibility of the village deity's propitiation and the giving away of medicine and allied advices is very complicated affair. Failure in this respect or any kind of negligence would entail a dire consequence in respect of the life of the disciple taking initiation. Sometimes many miraculous

happenings take place in connection with the life and activities of the *Deyashis*. These events circulate in the day-to-day life of the rural folk through the ages which ultimately form a compact belief-pattern.

The *Deyashis* claim that their activities are governed by some sort of divine influence and they are appointed by God to help ailing and distressed people to cope with the unfavourable circumstances of their life. The rural folk, in turn, completely subscribe to this idea and they consider the *Deyashis* as their saviours in critical periods of life. While working among the American folk healers, Yoder has also noted that they are believed to be supported by supernatural power. "They were, if we may be permitted the term, a kind of folk-clergy, recognized as having 'God-given' powers of healing" (1977 : 205). The *Deyashis* and the rural folk are to lead a concerted life—the mutual understanding amongst them has made the rural life very fascinating. The *Deyashis* are regarded as all rounders. In them there are evidences of age-old experience of healing art. They are exorcists, snake-bite doctors, skin diseases doctors, bone-setters, magicians, herbalists and above all priests of the village deities. In curing patients they always seek the help of the village deities and the medicines, at all times, are given in front of these deities.

The worship of the folk-deities takes place on the fixed days of the week (shown in Table 6.2) when the patients, accompanied by the family members, approach the *Deyashis* for medicines. After the usual worship of the deity in presence of distinguished gathering, the *Deyashi* concerned calls his patients, one by one, and listens to their troubles with great sympathy. Then he tries to find out the cause of troubles according to various ways which range from exorcism to the study of human anatomy and physiology. Sometimes the *Deyashis* may be 'possessed' at the time of analysing the cause of diseases. After the diagnosis and offer of medicines the patients bow down before the deities with some votive offerings. The *Deyashis* receive nominal fees for their service which, most of the time, is influenced by philanthropic attitude.

In course of an extensive study for the period of 14 months altogether 573 patients with different diseases had been interviewed at the different centres of village deities. Excepting a few

cases all the patients had either received good result of the treatment conducted by the *Deyashi* concerned or they were on the verge of getting relief from excessive troubles. From direct interviews with the attending patients it has been gathered that these people have got deep faith in the miraculous nature of village deities under whose blessings the *Deyashis* have been working through generations.

Deyashi-Faridi Relationship

The *Deyashis* are tradition-bound healers who have been playing the most essential role in health and disease of the rural folk. It has already been discussed that the *Deyashis* are thought to possess divine authority to fight the demon of disease and to suggest requisite measures for the maintenance of the general health of the locality. The *faridis* are common rural folk who have been attacked by various diseases creating trouble in their day-to-day life. By nature these rural people are ignorant of scientific achievements and are bound by customs and traditions of the society in which they live. The *faridis* approach the *Deyashis* of the various shrines of the village deities for solutions of their problems arising out of diseases. The studies so far made in India on the problems of health and disease reveal the common feature that the indigenous medicinal system in India is deeply set in the cultural setting of the people. There is practically no difference between the folk practitioners and the patients. Both come from the same cultural level and one can easily understand the other. The folk practitioners talk freely with the patient and even with the members of his family about the cause and way of treating the disease. The indigenous etiology as explained by folk practitioner is clearly understood by the patient who shares the same cultural setting. Carstairs (Paul, ed., 1955) and Marriott (Paul, ed., 1955) have studied the health and disease in Indian villages and they have shown that the western scientific medicines have not been penetrated into the cultural setting of rural India. This is due to the social and cultural difference between the patients and the practitioners of the western medicinal system. Economic factors have also played great role in it. The payment to the western medical practitioners is to be made in cash and also in advance. There is no guarantee of curing the disease—and the patient does not receive

any assurance accompanied by explanations for his relief. The folk practitioner is not necessarily to be paid in cash and there is no hard and fast rule in this regard. The patient may pay in kind also which is highly convenient for the rural folk. Gould's (1957) study on Sherpur advocates that the people ask the help of folk practitioner when the disease is classified as chronic non-incapacitating dysfunctions and in critical incapacitating dysfunctions the assistance of the scientific practitioner is needed. Whatever may be the fact, it can be taken for granted that in India the mutual understanding between the folk practitioner and the patient is the main factor for the large scale acceptance of folk medicine in the rural setting.

The present study reveals that the relationship between the folk practitioner and the patient—the *Deyashi* and the *faridi* is based on mutual collaboration and reciprocal understanding. The *faridi*, whatever may be his problems, secret or open, can communicate to the *Deyashi*, who, in turn, does not fail to come down to the level of his *faridi*. The *faridi* expects sympathy and generosity from his medical adviser, and he readily gets it. The *Deyashi* is regarded by the *faridi* and his friends as the associate of the folk deity and naturally the *faridi* looks towards *Deyashi* with requisite reverence. The *Deyashi* regards himself as a mediator between the divine world and the human being on the earth. Also he believes that his diagnosis and prognosis are all oriented by the deities themselves and he is merely an agent sponsored by divine blessings. This particular sentiment in the life and activities of the *Deyashis* has prevented them from becoming business-minded, i.e., earning a lot through the treatment of diseases. On the contrary, they have become philanthropic to a considerable extent. There are so many occasions when the *Deyashi* leaves everything to the *faridi*. If he recovers and is thereby satisfied, he can make some offering to the *Deyashi* and the deity concerned according to his means. The payment to the *Deyashi* is always regarded as the offering made before the deity because of the fact that the local tradition admits *Deyashi's* indispensable connection with the deity or deities. This particular phenomenon fulfils the double purpose which is very much liked by the rural folk whose life-ways and thought-ways are intrinsically influenced by the folk deities. In his integrated research works on the folk medicinal system and

its practices in the United States Yoder finds that the "primitive healer is successful because he treats the community along with the patient. The patient is an integral part of the folk community; the loss of life and the loss of work at the crucial time during the year are losses to the community—a disturbance to the normal rhythm of life" (1977: 208).

The folk medicines organized by the *Deyashis* are regarded as the integral part of the total culture and these not only bind the *Deyashis* by moral obligations to serve the *faridis* irrespective of castes, classes and religions, but these impel the *Deyashis* to dedicate their life for the general well-being of the people. It is for this reason that the *Deyashi* of Chandi at Metela village spends greater part of time in serving his *faridis* approaching him without any break. He receives all of them with profound sympathy and treats them with great care. The *faridis* are asked to make befitting offerings to the deity after their full recovery from the disease. The *Deyashi* in question does not demand anything from his *faridis* whom he considers to be his own men. The *faridis* find easy access to the household of the *Deyashi* where they quench their thirst and relax. At this time the *faridis* find themselves in an atmosphere of fellow-feeling which exerts a remarkable influence on their mental set-up. The *Deyashis* are well aware about the fact that their services are sponsored by the deities. It is due to this feeling the *Deyashi* of Lakshmindarpur village declines the invitation from District Hospital at Suri to attend the cases of bone fractures. His service was once requisitioned by the hospital authorities on getting the information of his technical ability in the setting of dislocated bones in the body. But the *Deyashi* in question did not agree with the proposal of serving the patient or helping in the procedure of bone-setting at the hospital. He did so because he considered his service as sacred, selfless and deity-oriented. The genuine devotion of the *Deyashis* towards their entire profession and their sympathy for suffering humanity are the root cause of overall popularity of folk medicine. There are occasions when this popularity of the *Deyashi* is wiped out due to insincerity, inactiveness and business-mindedness of the particular *Deyashi* in respect of his traditional profession. Abadhut Bagdi, a *Deyashi* of Chandi and Manasa at Bhanra village has cut a sorry figure as he has failed to keep the flame of selfless service to the ailing

humanity burning. The *faridis* now-a-days try to avoid the once very popular and busy centre of folk deities at Bhanra as the *Deyashis* concerned has nothing to attract the *faridis*.

The attitude of faith and reliance on the *Deyashis* at the most critical phase in the life of the *faridis* should be considered as the essential factor in the spread of popularity of these folk practitioners. The *Deyashis* of the folk deities in the village of the region under study attract large number of *faridis* at the different periods of the year. The life of the rural folk of the region is very much influenced by the *Deyashis* as the latter are taken not only as their medical advisers but also their well-wishers and guides.

A number of rural health centres have been established in this region at Tantipara, Hetampur, Nacraconda, Joydev-Kenduli and Shibpur, where there are some facilities for the villagers to receive modern scientific treatment. In addition to the services rendered by the *Deyashis* the rural folk started to benefit from the modern scientific physicians and the trained nurses since the establishment of these rural health units. People began to visit these health centres off and on for the treatment of diseases. But in no time the rural folk have developed an apathy towards these modern clinics in spite of the free treatment conducted by these medical units. It would be seen in the villages mentioned that a number of brick-built buildings of the different departments of the health centres including the residential quarters of the doctors, nurses and other employees have suddenly sprung up in the midst of small mud-built dilapidated huts of the poor rural communities. The doctors and nurses who have been appointed here feel very little for these down-trodden communities. On the contrary, they feel pity for the ignorant rural folk and sometimes laugh at the age-old traditional medicines. In course of study the author has visited all the health centres and watched from close quarters the nature of treatment received by the ailing folk of the rural settings. In all the places people do not forget to admit that the staff of the health centres are really educated and trained to do the job meant for them but at the same time they believe that these people are exclusively not for them. They have come here for their own livelihood. When the author paid a visit to the health centre at Nacraconda he saw an old woman was crying loudly

at the verandah of the building for the infectious diseases. On enquiry it was gathered that the daughter of the old woman was suffering from acute diarrhoea. The doctor of the health centre had attended her for some time and then he went away on the plea that there were no requisite medicines at his disposal to fight that acute case. On saying this the doctor departed and the attending nurse followed the same path. The old woman was striking her forehead and asking frequently the help of God in that completely helpless condition. In almost all the health centres in rural areas the doctor-patient relationship is characterized by utter indifference. The health centre at Shibpur village is situated in the heart of the Santal dwellings but the tribals are very much apathetic to this centre of treatment. On the other hand, no step has ever been taken by the authorities of the health unit or any other like-organization to attract the attention of the tribal folk towards the activities of the health unit. The doctors, nurses and other staff of the health centres maintain a distance from the life-ways and thought-ways of the rural folk for whose service they have been appointed. In all the cases the doctors and nurses have come to these village health units from urban settings and most of the time they fail to adjust themselves with the cultural matrix of the locality. As a necessary consequence, these medical personnel remain completely severed from the social and emotional factors of the rural folk which are receiving tremendous importance in the treatment of disease during the present period. It has now been accepted by stalwarts in the field of medical science that successful practice of medicine depends not only on the diagnostic and therapeutic dexterity but also on the physician's understanding of the psychological, cultural and social problems which exert considerable influence on health and disease. The response of the individuals, families and communities to the different measures taken up to promote and restore health is of utmost importance for a successful medical mission (Hassan and Prasad, 1959 : 183).

The modern medical personnel belonging to the various rural health centres have failed due to obvious reasons to enter into the psycho-social atmosphere of the rural folk as the former have come from different socio-cultural set-up with different sets of values. The rural folk naturally hesitate to communicate

them all that they feel and think in respect of health and disease. The medicine, whatever it may be, prescribed by the doctor of the health centre ultimately finds no whole-hearted response from the individual as well as familial levels. It is for this reason the rural folk prefer the services of the folk practitioners even when the scientific medical help is ready at their door-steps. The *Deyashi-faridi* bond of relationship is marked by mutual understanding and love for the distressed folk which is completely absent in the doctor-patient relationship.

It is not the intention of the present author to undermine the activities of the rural health centres which have been set up to render medical help to the down-trodden people of the rural areas. But in order to focus the traditional and obligatory relationship pattern between *Deyashi* and *faridi* in the system of folk medicine such affairs like the workings of the rural health centres have been brought to light. It is not the quality of the medicine but the very attitude of the *Deyashi* towards his *faridi* and the former's overall psychotherapeutic actions over the patient and his family members are the key to success. Here lies the prestige and power of *Deyashi*—his readiness to shoulder the sufferings and anxieties of the *faridi* gives him a paramount position in the hearts of the rural folk. The *Deyashi-faridi* relationship is thus built by responsibility, love for the sufferers and reciprocal obligations and is characterized by the social and emotional background, the realization of which is a must in the successful introduction of any kind of medicine in a particular community.

NOTES

1. A kind of recipe conditioned by age-old customs and traditions. It is based on time-long experience of the people who have been keeping close watch over the behaviour-pattern of animals and plants through the ages. Man had to face the challenge in connection with the disease which readily turned the healthy persons in disastrous and helpless situation. But man did not surrender at the tentacles of the demon of disease; rather he stood boldly to resist the demon by means of his own life-ways and thought-ways. Most of the time folk medicine is based on remedies and medical preparation found in nature. In tribal and primitive communities magic has played a great

role in the system of medicine. Folk medicine has a deep-rooted background in the development of peasant culture. Its clientele is drawn from variegated people at the various cultural levels and economic standpoint. On this ground folk medicine is said to have "a long and honourable history—much much, longer than present-day western medicine. Its roots go into hoary antiquity" (George, 1970: 1). In village India folk medicine is highly conditioned by the influence of different deities and sometimes it is so deep that folk medicine and village deities have become an integrated whole (Sarkar, 1978: 3). A folk-medico-ritualistic perspective has been resulted there which focus large mass of facts in relation to the health, hygiene, beliefs, practices and world views of the rural folk.

2. The system of folk medicine is based on the traditional aspects of the society concerned and, therefore, it is essential to analyse the cultural heritage of the community concerned in order to draw a full-fledged picture of folk medicine practised by the particular community. The indigenous therapeutic pattern is seen to be integrated into the cultural view-points and philosophy of life. The application of folk medicine is, most of the time, associated with a number of ritual performances and it holds good both for the practitioners and for the patients. As a natural consequence, the socioritual beliefs and practices have been intermingled into the medical sphere based on local traditions. Onoge, in his recent study in Africa has shown the importance of social and cultural factors in the etiology of sickness and health therapy. In traditional African belief "there was always a sharp recognition that the genesis of sickness could be influenced by tensions and disturbances in social relationship" (1975: 220).
3. A practitioner of healing rites. The term 'shaman' is of Siberian origin. It is commonly used to denote generic qualities of native medical practices in different parts of the world which involve various types of magico-religious beliefs and traditions. The shamans of Siberia are classified into three categories—(a) the most powerful and learned shamans who practise magic and possess wonder-working powers, (b) the shamans who do not perform wonder but are known as reputed diviners and healers, and (c) the shamans with sensitive nervous system who are experts in dream-reading and healing minor diseases. The native healers of India also possess various powers by which they are categorized into different grades. These powers are dependent on the personal ability of the healer, nature of deity he propitiates, the practical training he receives from his *guru* and above all his tact and perseverance in the line.
4. Two books on folk medicine have been edited by two distinguished scholars. The first book entitled "Symposium on Folk Medicine" is edited by Carl-Herman Tillhagen. It is the outcome of the Inter-Nordic Symposium at Nordiska Museet, Stockholm, 1961. The Symposium was based on the study of relationship between scientific and folk-medical traditions. Twenty distinguished scholars

representing multifarious disciplines like medicine, history of medicine, veterinary sciences, cultural anthropology, history of religion and ethnography took active part in the Symposium. The second book has been edited by Elfriede Grabner and is entitled "Folk Medical Research" (1967).

5. Pennsylvania Research Society has been encouraging scholars to conduct systematic works on folk medicine. Two important and valuable contributions on the system of folk medicine are David E. Lick and T.R. Brendle's "Plant Names and Plant Lore Among Pennsylvania Germans", and T.R. Brendle and C.W. Unger's "Folk Medicine of the Pennsylvania Germans: the Non-Occult Cures". The first one was published in the Proceedings of the Pennsylvania Research Society, Vol. 33 (1923) and the second one appeared in Vol. 45 (1935) in the Proceedings of the same society.
6. The method of folk medicine extensively used by the Russian and Siberian folk healers who possessed an ability to "talk away" pains and aches, specially of a nervous origin. They were even able to stop bleeding caused by external haemorrhages by the application of this method. In recent years the Soviet Scientists have focused discernible light on this primitive method to find out the root cause of the system. It has been seen, in course of experiments, that certain sounds perform physiological functions on the body specially on the nervous system.
7. The system of therapy in which sounds are used in the treatment of various diseases. Dr. Alexander Dogel has conducted different experiments on the principle of sonic-therapy used by the folk healers. He has discovered that certain human voices that are used in a particular way produce important physiological changes. The nervous system is very much responsible to the sonic treatment. It has been shown by experiments that the heart-pumping activity can be lowered by the production of particular sounds. In this connection, it may be pointed out that the shamans in Siberia always accompany their *burben* or the tambourine producing rhythmic sound at the time of treating any patient. The shaman recites various incantations loudly and with this he plays the tambourine in front of the patient. These sounds extensively produce striking physiological changes in the body of the patient. It has been proved by experiments that the thematic content of incantations and prayers has no actual part to play but it is the nature of sound which brings actual reaction on the body. It is to be noted that certain practitioners are only able to produce the rhythmic sound to perform physiological functions in human body.
8. One of the four *Vedas* which contains various discussions on the causation and cure of numerous diseases. In the *Atharvaveda* two systems of medicines are detected—(1) the system in which charms and magico-religious medicines predominate and (2) the system of

drugs that are used on an empirico-rational basis. There are numerous hymns in the *Atharvaveda* which are to be recited at the time of the application of magico-religious medicine. The *Atharvaveda* dictates that committing of sins, showing of disrespect to the gods and goddesses, violation of social norms, attacked by the witches and evil spirits are the principal causes of diseases in human society. Treatment of diseases solely depended on the various causes held responsible for the ailments. In most of the cases magico-religious pattern was coupled with some herbal preparation. The demons of the diseases were addressed by the priest-physician through the well-composed hymns and they were asked to leave the body of the patients (Jaggi, 1973: 12). The wearing of amulets was seen extensively in the *Atharvavedic* period which was meant for guarding the wearer against disease and misfortune. Numerous vegetable products were used for the preparation of amulets.

9. The *Arthashastra* is said to have been composed by Kautilya during the middle of the third Century B.C. The book is packed up with various aspects of medical practice, health and hygiene of the period in question in addition to the nature and extent of administration. It discusses the duties and responsibilities of the physicians in the society as well as peoples' mode of behaviour in the maintenance of healthy atmosphere in the kingdom as a whole.

Charaka Samhita is a renowned work on ancient Indian medicine. It is divided into eight parts—*sutra*, *nidana*, *vimana*, *sarira*, *indrya*, *chikitsa*, *kalpa* and *siddha-sthanas*. These are again divided into many chapters. Originally it was composed by Agnivesa, one of the six students of Atrya, which was subsequently and thoroughly revised by Charaka with the addition of much explored data and came to be known as *Charaka Samhita* in course of time. In Ayurvedic medicinal system *Charaka Samhita* acquires a conspicuous position. It discusses the etiology of various diseases and also their classification, pathology, diagnosis and treatment. The technique of rejuvenation of the body was efficiently presented. The subjects like development of foetus, anatomy of the human body and osteological disorders are systematically narrated here. Medicines mainly consist of vegetable, animal and earthly products.

Susruta Samhita is the ancient Indian surgical knowledge. It is popularly known as *Satya-tantra*. It has five divisions, viz, *sutra*, *nidana*, *sarira*, *chikitsa* and *kalpa*. The five divisions of the *Samhita* were later on made to eight by the addition of new data. *Susruta* established himself as a great surgeon and he made an attempt to improve the general techniques of surgery and introduced many new and novel methods of operations of the human body. *Susruta Samhita* is the store-house of these practical experiences gathered by the great ancient Indian surgeon through the ages.

10. In the study of disease and its relevant treatment pattern special stresses are being laid, in this country as elsewhere, on the social and

emotional factors. Man and nature as well as man and culture are seen to be engaged in continuous transactions—each factor is largely influenced by the other and thus a concerted picture is reflected round bio-social perspectives. It has been argued that successful practice of medicine is dependent not only on the therapeutic skill and diagnostic ability of the physicians but also on their understanding of the socio-psychological and cultural factors related to health and hygiene. Indian Medical Council has very recently adopted a resolution to reorient undergraduate medical education to foster social concepts in the minds of the students to understand the socio-cultural matrix of health and disease.

11. The native healers perform different functions at a time. In the region under study the healers are always associated with the worship of village deities. They are the priests of the village deities, on one hand, and the traditional healers, on the other. The healing art of these experts ranges from the giving of herbal medicines to the performance of occult practices. During the village level festivals they receive deep regard from the participants as the priests of the deities and at the time of difficult situations arising out of diseases they are called in as doctors with full confidence. These persons, locally known as *Deyashis*, are to perform both the functions of priests and medicine-men and they are practically trained up in these two spheres for the cause of humanity.

Village Deities and Integrating Patterns

I

THE festivals that are centred round the performances of village deities have got a special role in the integration of stratified village societies. A trend of compromise and accommodation is distinctly seen in the various stages of observances of festivals that are done on village as well as regional levels. Festivals are regarded as the essential factors of human society. Through festivals the joyous expressions of human mind are seen to be reflected. In each and every society of the world festivals are observed in some form or the other but the nature and extent of such festivals vary from one society to another. Festivals are generally associated with various actions of human society. Social, religious, economic and political actions and interactions of human life find their effective expressions in the various stages of festivals. In the festivals that are observed on ritualistic background a complicated body of magico-religious beliefs and practices form the central theme. During actual performances of these festivals an integrated pattern of different understandings of philosophical standpoints comes to limelight which is conditioned by a concerted group-life. No doubt the festivals provide ample scope of merry-making and enjoyment of a joyful rhythm of song and dances characterized by revelry and pageantry.

The festivals that are observed in the rural settings in

connection with the performances of worship of different village deities have got the special characteristic features so far as the common participations of different castes and communities are concerned. In the various stages of observances of these festivals relating to the village deities active participation of different castes and communities becomes the essential features which for the time being suppress the rigidity of caste-system and communal feelings. The traditional Brahminical supremacy¹ especially in religious spheres becomes inert, though for a very short duration, and the people occupying the lower rungs of the social ladder play dominant role in the socio-religious setting. In these viewpoints festivals of village deities deserve systematic study and analysis in understanding way of life of the people specially the rural folk. Mention may be made that a number of festivals pertaining to village deities have so far been studied from time immemorial but almost all these works are centred round origin and nature of the festivals. Different constituent elements of these festivals have been analysed in the background of the Hindu and other religious traditions together with the extent of incorporation of other alien thoughts and ideas that have been drawn from various stages of observances of festivals. These works lack the exposition of functional roles of the festivals² in the perspective of common participation of rural folk and pattern of ritualistic services tendered by various castes and communities made on the basis of detailed analysis of individual festival. But there are some fruitful attempts of studying functional roles of rural festivals in India by a few Indian as well as foreign scholars. While studying village life at the different regions of India, social anthropologists and sociologists like Dube, Majumdar, Marriott, Lewis, Sinha, Bhowmick and Srivastava³ have put forward considerable analytical discussions of village festivals though these are not to be regarded as full-fledged analysis of broad-based functional roles played by the festivals in village societies. Dube's work in Samirpet is characterized by simple description of the village festivals in very brief statement. He does not consider it essential to go deep into the detailed aspects of the festivals flourished in his village. Majumdar also has given stereotyped descriptions of a number of village festivals during his study at Mohna, Uttar Pradesh. The exact nature of participation by the village

folk and the impact of festivals on the life of the villagers have not been taken into consideration. Marriott has drawn a fascinating picture of village festivals at Kishan Garhi, Uttar Pradesh. Though the individual festival has been described in some details and various constituent elements have been analysed; but these are extensively done not to highlight the nature of folk participation and their social behaviour pattern but to formulate the masterly concepts like 'Universalization' and 'Parochialization'.⁴ Lewis has presented an analytical study of the festival cycle in Rampur, a Delhi village, after classifying these into various groups. The item-wise and nature-wise groupings of various festivals observed throughout the year give a broad perspective of festival cycle. But due importance has not been attached to the detailed discussions on people's participation in the different stages of the festivals. Sinha's work in a Bhumij village on the changes in the cycle of festivals highlights the interaction patterns of tribal and non-tribal viewpoints. His analysis on the caste-tribe interacting pattern centering round various elements of festival is characterized by careful analytical exposition. But no such attempt like detailed discussions on the nature and extent of festivals in respect of active participation of the people concerned has been made here. Bhowmick's work on some regional folk festivals in Midnapur district of West Bengal unveils the basic features of folk rituals and their implications. But he does not proceed considerably to put forward minor details of the festivals and their structural roles on human life. But in his later work (1973) Bhowmick has shown the credit of analysing the nature and extent of the persisting force of traditions through the systematic study of secret institutions which "came as a hope and guarantee to the common people" (18). The attempt of focusing the trend of continuity of the traditional Indian culture through the existence and nature of transformations of the secret institutions as well as through the evaluation of the activities and practices of their organisers—the *gunins*—has become unique in itself. The aspects like worship of different deities, purposes of the magical performances, caste and community affiliations of the *gunins* in the perspective of the caste-cluster and hierarchy in the regional social setting have been categorically evaluated here to find out the diverse spheres

of functioning of the secret institutions. Srivastava's work on festivals in two villages—one in Rajasthan and the other in Eastern U.P.—gives a productive picture of the structural-functional basis of various festivals. He has gone to the extent of analysing his data by the different conceptual frame-works put forward by various experts. The interacting pattern of elite and folk traditions has given due importance though detailed analysis regarding people's participation in these festivals are lacking. In his recent study on the patterns of worship of various deities in Bishnupur, a town in West Bengal, Akos Oster has presented a fascinating picture of *puja* which he realises "as an idiom of action and as a concept" (1978: 120). The diverse elements of *puja* have been analysed here in the perspective of ideological and exegetical dimensions of different rites, beliefs and cults. In course of study he discovers many contexts of *puja* and all these are tied up with the day-to-day living of the people and have got close link with the philosophy of life. He has traced the behaviour of social groups in the background of *puja* and has observed that it depends on the deity as well as the groups themselves. The deity and the cults perform double-fold purpose of mediating between caste and locality and also between beliefs and ideology. On the whole, the study highlights a thorough perspective of gods and cults in relation to the socio-cultural and psycho-ritual aspects of the people.

This particular chapter of the present study is exclusively devoted to pin-point the actual trend of people's participation, both direct and indirect, in the festivals of village deities and thereby to highlight the nature and extent of integrating pattern of variegated human groups based on varieties of castes, classes and religions. Due importance has been attached to the nature of services rendered by the different people with their traditional remunerations; the risk and responsibilities shouldered by the *Deyashis* of the village deities in the organization of worship and handling the roaring deities together with their selfless beneficial services for the cause of the general public. In the course of successive discussions it is seen how the rural folk in spite of their dissimilitude in social gradings, economic standard and philosophical outlook form a concerted whole round the different festivals of the village deities done on village as well as regional

levels. Here lies the significance of village festivals; the rhythm of festivals becomes attuned to the very heart of the people belonging to the rich or poor sections, privileged or depressed groups of the society. These can be called as the village festivals in the strict sense of the term as there is no scope for anybody to keep himself aloof from the organization of the festivities (Sarkar, 1978: 22-23). All are regarded important here and nobody is kept off the shrine on any plea of caste and religion. Everybody gets easy access to the worshippers as well as to the deities and is free to put forward his personal problems in the hope of getting required solutions. There is no particular demand for offerings to these deities and what is more important lies in the fact that on getting requisite medicines for treatment of diseases a patient-client may pay any amount according to his ability. Various recreational programmes that are generally arranged at the premises of the deities are all the time based on local recital parties⁵ and they depict popular indigenous tales of origin and influence of the deities concerned, and also their kindness-oriented blessings to their devotees. All the audience find it easy to assimilate the subject-matter of discussions through song and dance which, as a natural consequence, give them ample opportunities to think that the deities and their related festivals are part and parcel of their own life-ways and thought-ways.

The seventeen different festivals (Table 7.1) based on the worship of five types of village deities are no doubt centred round ritualistic performances conditioned by different magico-religious activities with numerous thoughts and ideas of non-Vedic traditions. With the nature and extent of focusing integrating pattern of various grades of people belonging to different classes, castes and communities a positive attempt has been taken up here to highlight the trend of interaction of non-Vedic and Vedic thoughts and ideas. The trend of sanskritization of various indigenous religious sentiments have been assessed here following Srinivas' concept, and there are ample scopes to evaluate the process of gradual infiltration of thoughts and ideas of great traditions pertaining to Brahmin-oriented Hindu religion. On the whole, the purpose of this chapter is to unfold the exact nature of integration of the stratified social groups and assimilation of diverse ideas belonging to the great and little

TABLE 7.1: List of Folk Festivals Observed in Ten Villages

Name of festivals	Name of the villages where observed	Date of observance
1. Dharmarajpuja	1. Tanti para	<i>Vaisakhi Purnima</i>
	2. Metela	<i>Vaisakhi Purnima</i>
	3. Ekabbarpur	<i>Vaisakhi Purnima</i>
	4. Tentulbandh	<i>Vaisakhi Purnima</i>
	5. Lakshindarpur	<i>Vaisakhi Purnima</i>
2. Chandipuja	1. Metela	3rd day of <i>Magh</i>
	2. Khairadihi	3rd Tuesday of <i>Chaitra</i>
	3. Lauberia	1st day of <i>Magh</i>
	4. Bhanra	Abolished
3. Manasapuja	1. Joydev-kenduli	<i>Dasahara</i>
	2. Bhanra	<i>Bakpanchami</i>
	3. Tanti para	<i>Sravan sankranti</i>
	4. Metela	No fixed date
4. Mahadanapuja	1. Shibpur	1st day of <i>Magh</i>
	2. Metela	1st and 2nd day of <i>Magh</i>
5. Kalipuja	1. Shibpur	<i>Kartick Amabasya</i>
	2. Metela	<i>Agrahayan Amabasya</i>
	3. Bhanra	<i>Agrahayan Amabasya</i>

t raditions following the conceptual understanding of Redfield. In so doing different stages of the festivals, described in minor details in Chapter 5, have been brought into consideration in the background of people's direct and indirect participation. The overall dependency of the rural folk on the village deities throughout the year specially during the auspicious moments of propitiation of the deities in question focus considerable light on the pattern of integration despite many dissimilarities in thoughts and actions of the common folk. The village deities are bounded by many traditional relationships amongst themselves and also with the human communities belonging to different villages (see Fig. 4.4 on pre-page No. 140). This trend of integrity that has been established through the ages between village deities and the villagers is a deep-rooted phenomenon which has done a great deal in establishing a good reciprocal relationship between the two spheres—human and divine.

In the following discussions some concrete examples of participation of rural folk in the different stages of festivals relating to *puja* performances of five different types of village deities have been cited to have a comprehensive idea on the establishment of reciprocal relationship amongst the variegated castes and communities and emergence of mutual understanding in the ritualistic spheres in the villages as a whole. The fact that the villagers, irrespective of castes and communities, work together for some common purpose is evident by the overall restrictions observed by each and every family of the villages on the occasion of worship of the village deity concerned. Prior to every worship a proclamation is passed by drum-beat through the village paths as regards the observance of worship of the particular deity and requisite restrictions that are imposed upon the people in their daily life. These restrictions are to be effected from the previous day of actual worship and these continue up to the eighth day from that particular day (Sarkar, 1969: 8). The different restrictions that are carefully maintained by the villagers have been summarized below:

1. Washing of clothes by the application of soap or *soda* is restricted.
2. Preparation of perched rice, flattened rice, frying of grams, peas, etc., is not allowed.
3. Boiling of paddy and husking by *dhenki* (indigenous husking lever) are restricted.
4. At least one person from each family must observe fasting until the worship is completed.
5. The shaving and hair-cutting on the day of worship is restricted.
6. If a death case occurs in the village, worship of the deity must not be performed until and unless the dead body is carried to the cremation ground.
7. Ploughing in the field is restricted until the worship is completed.

Thus, from the very outset of the *puja* festival the village deity brings forth oneness in the stratified village society. This particular feeling is nurtured by religious sentiments and it provides ample scope to the villagers belonging to various social

gradings and with various occupations and world view to think themselves residing within a very large and extended family under the guardianship of the particular village deity.

II

The festivals in connection with *Dharmaraj puja* in five villages, viz., Tantipara (two wards), Metela, Ekabbarpur, Tentulbandh and Lakshindarpur present a unique appeal of united work conditioned by traditions and customs. Table 7.2 pin-points a systematic picture of caste and service pattern in the different stages of the *puja*. All the services are hereditary in nature and a large number of castes, including clean and unclean castes, actively shoulder the responsibility of the various phases of the festivals. In most of the time the persons performing the essential duties receive their traditional remunerations mostly in kinds but it is to be noted that the economic significance of these remunerations is negligible. What is taken as most important is the prestige value and everyone is hankering after this. This may be illustrated by citing one example. Sri Pati Dom, the traditional drum-beater of the *Dharmaraj puja* at Metela could not turn up due to his sudden illness and his service was duly performed by another drum-beater, Mahan Dom of the same village. But at the time of taking remuneration Pati Dom claimed the chopped off head of the sacrificed goat as his traditional payment. It was highly objected by Mahan Dom. The latter claimed that as a drum-beater of the year he was to be honoured by this remuneration. When the *puja* Committee requested Mahan to receive cash payment as per usual rate for the essential service that he had rendered, he refused. Ultimately he received the chopped off head of the sacrificed animal in front of large gathering as a token of his prestige in a village festival and finally he, with a smiling face, did not hesitate to hand over the same to the traditional drum-beater, Pati Dom. All the services and the remuneration patterns as depicted in the Table in question are based on age-old traditions and the particular persons feel it as their sacred duty to engage themselves in the different services during the *puja* performance of Dharmaraj.

The *Bhaktiyas* are regarded as the essential factors of *puja*

performance. The fact that they come from different caste groups and their initiations are directly dependent on the services rendered by the village barber in presence of the village priest indicates a well-knit pattern of caste integration through the ages (Tables 7.3A to 7.3F). All the *Bhaktyas* have got their individual motives behind dedicating themselves as the active participants of Dharmaraj of different villages. The *Bhaktyas* who have got at least five years of continuous experience are taken into consideration in this enquiry. The village-wise distributions of the *Bhaktyas* in the year of survey are as follows: Tantipara/Hat-tala (31), Tantipara/Dhanyakuna (28), Metela (54), Tentulbandh (23) and Lakshindarpur (29). There are total 199 *Bhaktyas* who are divided into 16 caste-groups. The caste-wise distribution of the *Bhaktyas* and the number of persons taken initiation are like the following: Bagdi (51), Sadgop (41), Dom (35), Bauri (2), Goala (9), Mal (8), Moyra (8), Sutradhar (6), Tantubaya (5), Mahishya (4), Jele (3), Karmakar (3), Poddar (2), Muchi (2), Swarnakar (1), and Malakar (1). These caste-groups occupy different ladders in the stratified society. Each group has its own philosophy and there are different restrictions to maintain the rigidity of particular caste-groups. There are untouchable castes also in this sphere who are always kept aside by the privileged sections of the society. But as soon as the *Bhaktyas* take ceremonial shavings, they are identified as one socio-religious unit. All the caste and class barriers vanish and they are freely recognized by the common term "*Bhaktya* community"⁸ (Sarkar, 1965: 77). Just after the ceremonial shaving of the *Bhaktyas* conducted by the village barber the priest of the deity comes forward for a ceremony of the changing of the *gotras*. Before initiation the *Bhaktyas* receive *Deb-gotras*⁷ in exchange of their own *gotras*. The priest then offers sacred threads to all of them who are instructed to put these round their necks.

The *Bhaktyas* are to observe some restrictions in their daily life. They are to solely depend on vegetarian diet and the food should be prepared without salt. During the period of worship their chief diet mostly consists of fruits and milk. They do not go to their houses and avoid all kinds of household works. The *Bhaktyas* hold cane sticks in their hands and wear new *dhuti* and napkin. The *Bhaktyas*, after their proper initiation, are allowed

TABLE 7.2 : Various Stages in the Performance of Worship of Dharmaraj, Participation of Different Castes and Subsequent Remunerations

Name of villages	Preliminary arrangements made by	Caste affiliation	Remunerations, if any	Formal invitation to the officials of <i>puja</i>	Caste affiliation	Remunerations, if any	Informations communicated to the villagers	Caste affiliation	Remunerations, if any	Collection of subscriptions	Caste affiliation	Remunerations, if any	Plucking of flowers, <i>bel</i> leaves for worship	Caste affiliation	Remunerations, if any	Clearance of the temple premises	Caste affiliation	Remunerations, if any	Beating of drums	Caste affiliation	Remunerations, if any
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22
Tantipara Hat-tala	<i>Puja</i> Committee composed of 7 persons	Tantubaya, Brahmin, Moyra, Kumbhakar	Honorary	Traditional Manager of the <i>Puja</i> Committee	Tantubaya	Honorary	Drum-beater	Dom	5 pies of rice	Manager	Tantubaya	Honorary	Village barber	Napit	3 pies of rice, 1 pie pulses	Bidhu Das	Tantubaya	One chopped off head of the sacrificed goat/sheep	Musicians	Dom	15 to 20 rupees in cash
Tantipara Dhanyakuna	<i>Puja</i> Committee composed of 6 persons	Tantubaya, Brahmin, Moyra	Honorary	Manager of the <i>Puja</i> Committee	Tantubaya	Honorary	Drum-beater	Dom	5 pies of rice	Manager	Tantubaya	Honorary	<i>Bhaktyas</i>	—	3 pies of pulses one rupee in cash	Siblal Das	Tantubaya	One chopped off head of the sacrificed animal	Local drum party	Dom	15 to 20 rupees in cash
Metela	Formal village council	Goala, Brahmin, Sadgop, Grahacharya	Honorary	Village barber	Napit	One <i>sidha</i> , consisting of 5 <i>seers</i> rice, pulses, vegetables	Bhola Dom	Dom	3 pies of rice, 2 rupees in cash	Village Headman	Goala	Honorary	Village barber	Napit	2 pies of rice, 50 paise in cash	Pramatha Mondal	Mahishya	Enjoys three bighas of agricultural land	Pati Dom and Kalu Dom of Raiganj	Dom	10 rupees in cash, one chopped off head of goat, one cloth
Ekabbarpur	Family members of Bhakti Bhusan Mondal	Sadgop	Honorary	Bhakti Bhusan Mondal, the organizer	Sadgop	Honorary	Bijoy Dom	Dom	3 pies of rice, one rupee in cash	Bibhuti Mondal	Sadgop	One chopped off head of sacrificed goat	<i>Bhaktyas</i>	—	3 pies of pulses, one seer rice, one rupee in cash	Sanatan Dom, Haradhan Bagdi	Dom Bagdi	3 seers of rice, 50 paise in cash	Bijoy Dom and his party	Dom	Everyone receives 3 pies of rice and two rupees in cash
Tentulbandh	Binoy Mondal and fellow villagers	Sadgop	Honorary	Binoy Mondal	Sadgop	Honorary	Bhakti Mondal	Mahishya	3 pies of pulses and one rupee in cash	Bhakti Mondal	Sadgop	One <i>sidhaa</i> consisting of two seers rice, pulses and vegetables	Kali Charan Bagdi	Bagdi	3 pies of pulses, 50 paise in cash	Madan Dom	Dom	3 pies of pulses and 25 paise	Drum-beaters of Rajnagar	Dom	15 to 20 rupees in cash, 10 seers of rice
Lakshindarpur	Narayan Mondal	Sadgop	Honorary	Narayan Mondal	Sadgop	Honorary	Madhu Bhandari	Napit	One <i>sidha</i> consisting of 2 <i>seers</i> of rice, pulses vegetables and sweets	Anil Mondal	Sadgop	One chopped off head of the sacrificed animal	<i>Bhaktyas</i>	—	3 pies of pulses, 2 pies rice and cash	Haru Bagdi	Bagdi	One <i>sidhaa</i> containing rice, pulses and vegetables	Drum-beaters of Karidhya	Dom	12 rupees in cash, one <i>sidhaa</i> containing 10 seers of rice, 2 seers of pulses, vegetables and sweets



TABLE 7.3A : Particulars about the Bhaktyas Village—Tantipara (Hat-tala)

Serial No.	Name of Bhaktyas	Age (in years)	Caste affiliation	Duration of initiation (in years)	Motive behind initiation
1	2	3	4	5	6
1.	Badal Das (<i>mul-Bhaktya</i>)	53	Tantubaya/weaver	31	Family tradition.
2.	Paran Chandra Das	44	"	20	-do-
3.	Amar Chandra Das	32	"	10	For getting relief from colic pain.
4.	Aghore Mohan Mondal	46	Sadgop	11	Family tradition.
5.	Jiban Mondal	32	"	5	For curing some female diseases of his wife.
6.	Hareram Mondal	38	"	10	To get relief from rheumatism.
7.	Anukul Chandra Karmakar	42	Karmakar/blacksmith	8	Family tradition.
8.	Bagal Chandra Dawn	48	Moyra/confectioner	12	For curing some sexual diseases.
9.	Abinash Chandra Dawn	52	"	18	To win the case in the Court of Law.
10.	Malinda Sutradhar	32	Sutradhar/carpenter	8	To get relief from family feuds.
11.	Mriganka Sen	34	Poddar	5	For happy and prosperous life.
12.	Sanatan Mondal	43	Goala/milkman	5	For having children.
13.	Amarnath Das	40	Swarnakar/goldsmith	6	To get rid of colic pain.
14.	Manoj Kumar Dhibar	32	Jele/fisherman	5	For getting physical strength.
15.	Rakhahari Dhibar	43	"	11	Family tradition.
16.	Panchanan Bagdi	60	Bagdi	27	-do-
17.	Debu Bagdi	62	"	35	Divine command received in a dream.

(Contd.)

TABLE 7.3A—Contd.

1	2	3	4	5	6
18.	Bauri Bagdi	58	Bagdi	25	Divine instruction through dream.
19.	Kartick Bagdi	65	"	40	For the cure of pain in chest.
20.	Sasthi Bagdi	41	"	21	Family tradition.
21.	Haren Bagdi	34	"	15	To get relief from nervousness.
22.	Pashu Bagdi	47	"	22	For the cure of rheumatism.
23.	Gostha Bagdi	46	"	21	-do-
24.	Sibu Bagdi	49	"	25	For the cure of stomach trouble.
25.	Jadu Bagdi	50	"	25	Family tradition.
26.	Ashu Bagdi	63	"	40	For general welfare of the family.
27.	Basanta Mal	29	Mal	9	To get children.
28.	Sahadev Mal	58	"	38	Through divine instruction in the form of dream.
29.	Amar Bauri	38	Bauri	12	For the cure of colic pain.
30.	Atika Bauri	47	"	21	For general family welfare.
31.	Mahadev Bauri	42	"	14	To get relief from chronic pain in the waist.

TABLE 7.3B : Particulars about the Bhaktyas Village—Tantipara (Dhanyakuna)

Serial No.	Name of Bhaktyas	Age (in years)	Caste affiliation	Duration of initiation (in years)	Motive behind initiation
1	2	3	4	5	6
1.	Madhab Chandra Das	45	Tantubaya/weaver	21	For general family welfare.
2.	Nilkantha Das	39	"	16	To get relief from rheumatism.
3.	Nalini Das	28	"	10	Family tradition.
4.	Rakhahari Ghose	29	Goala/milkman	11	For having son.
5.	Sudeb Ghose	32	"	13	For curing skin diseases.
6.	Sudhan Dawn	39	Morya/confectioner	15	For the cure of his diseased son.
7.	Ajit Kumar Dawn	42	"	18	For the cure of rheumatism.
8.	Bholanath Dawn	38	"	12	For the cure of chronic stomach trouble.
9.	Amulya Malakar	42	Malakar/florist	10	Continuous pain in waist.
10.	Pulin Dhibar	30	Jele/fisherman	12	To cure prolonged fever.
11.	Anil Sen	28	Poddar	8	To get relief from rheumatism.
12.	Mahadev Sutradhar	32	Sutradhar/carpenter	12	To cure chronic dysentery.
13.	Nilmadhab Sutradhar	36	"	10	To cure the sterility of his wife.
14.	Bansari Bagdi	32	Bagdi	8	To get rid of family troubles.
15.	Ambujaksha Bagdi	39	"	12	For general family welfare.
16.	Bhajahari Bagdi	47	"	14	To get relief from asthma.

(Contd.)

TABLE 7.3B—Contd

1	2	3	4	5	6
17.	Ramtaran Bagdi	43	Bagdi	10	To cure skin diseases.
18.	Madhab Chandra Bagdi	52	"	18	For the cure of constant delirium of his son.
19.	Matilal Mal	39	Mal	12	For general family welfare.
20.	Sadhan Mal	48	"	21	For cure of his chronic asthma.
21.	Sridam Bauri	42	Bauri	20	For the cure of whooping cough of his daughter.
22.	Kshudiram Bauri	43	"	22	To get rid of chronic eye trouble.
23.	Helaram Bauri	38	"	12	To get rid of family feuds.
24.	Rampada Bauri	31	"	8	Family tradition.
25.	Hriday Bauri	49	"	15	Divine command through dream.
26.	Abinash Dom	37	Dom	17	For general family welfare.
27.	Madhab Dom	48	"	22	For curing severe and continuous pain in the waist.
28.	Sarbeswar Dom	42	"	15	Family tradition.

TABLE 7.3C : Particulars about the Bhaktyas—Village Metela

Serial No.	Name of Bhaktyas	Age (in years)	Caste affiliation	Duration of initiation (in years)	Motive behind initiation
1	2	3	4	5	6
1.	Sanatan Gope	52	Goala/milkman	27	As per family custom.
2.	Mahadev Gope	50	"	22	-do-
3.	Bidhan Gope	46	"	19	-do-
4.	Sibsadhan Gope	49	"	20	For general family welfare.
5.	Hriday Chandra Gope	37	"	12	To improve general health.
6.	Manish Chandra Gope	25	"	8	No particular motive.
7.	Abinash Mondal	28	Sadgop	7	To cure venereal disease.
8.	Vishnu Mondal	48	"	12	To get rid of colic pain.
9.	Muchiram Mondal	52	"	15	To cure rheumatism.
10.	Mongol Mondal	32	"	9	Family tradition.
11.	Hareram Mondal	42	"	15	To cure Fileria.
12.	Ajit Mondal	39	"	12	To cure mental trouble.
13.	Ajay Mondal	22	"	6	For the improvement of father's health.
14.	Bhairab Mondal	41	"	13	Family tradition.
15.	Ballav Dawn	52	Moyra/confectioner	20	For the improvement of business.
16.	Nafar Dawn	41	"	12	For winning a case in the court.
17.	Bijay Dawn	30	"	8	No particular intention.
18.	Adhar Sutradhar	31	Sutradhar/carpenter	10	To cure asthma.

(Contd.)

TABLE 7.3C—Contd.

1	2	3	4	5	6
19.	Budhan Sutradhar	39	Sutradhar/carpenter	11	For the cure of chronic skin diseases.
20.	Abinash Sutradhar	47	"	14	To get relief from family feuds.
21.	Nirmal Karmakar	24	Karmakar/blacksmith	6	No particular intention.
22.	Ajay Karmakar	42	"	11	No particular intention.
23.	Abala Bagdi	39	Bagdi	10	Family tradition.
24.	Palan Bagdi	42	"	12	To cure asthma.
25.	Mahendra Bagdi	49	"	14	To cure chronic dysentery.
26.	Dhananjay Bagdi	40	"	9	No particular motive.
27.	Harish Bagdi	32	"	7	For general family welfare.
28.	Anadi Bagdi	48	"	10	Divine instruction through dream.
29.	Mahindra Bagdi	42	"	9	To recover excessively ill health.
30.	Baren Bagdi	32	"	7	For having children.
31.	Ranjan Bagdi	37	"	8	For general family welfare.
32.	Budhar Dom	41	Dom	10	To cure asthma.
33.	Prabhakar Dom	52	"	18	To get rid of rheumatic pain
34.	Lalu Dom	57	"	21	To cure mental disturbance.
35.	Abhay Dom	62	"	27	Family tradition.
36.	Narayan Dom	55	"	21	To maintain family peace.
37.	Gadadhar Dom	42	"	10	To cure asthma.
38.	Manasa Dom	37	"	9	For having children.

39.	Sadhan Dom	32	Dom	6	For bringing family peace.
40.	Mahinda Dom	45	"	11	For general family welfare.
41.	Pratulya Mal	42	Mal	8	Family tradition.
42.	Dwijen Mal	32	"	7	For having children.
43.	Mahadev Mal	34	"	8	For getting a son.
44.	Sudhir Mal	44	"	11	Divine instruction through dream.
45.	Sudhen Bauri	43	Bauri	12	To cure pain in the chest.
46.	Kalidas Bauri	39	"	8	For improvement of wife's health.
47.	Haradhan Bauri	49	"	10	For general family welfare.
48.	Dulal Bauri	41	"	14	Divine instruction through dream.
49.	Gora Bauri	44	"	8	To cure asthma.
50.	Lotai Bauri	37	"	8	For having children.
51.	Sripati Bauri	39	"	7	No particular motive.
52.	Tarapada Bauri	30	"	6	For general family welfare.
53.	Sakti Bauri	43	"	9	To cure venereal disease.
54.	Rabilal Muchi	39	Muchi	10	To cure chronic stomach pain.
55.	Supal Muchi	47	"	12	To cure Fifieria.

TABLE 7.3D : Particulars about the Bhaktyas—Village Ekabbarpur

Serial No.	Name of Bhaktyas	Age (in years)	Caste affiliation	Duration of initiation (in years)	Motive behind initiation
1	2	3	4	5	6
1.	Abhiram Mondal	42	Mahishya	28	To win a case in the Court of Law.
2.	Ganesh Mondal	39	"	12	To cure different diseases.
3.	Mrigen Mondal	48	"	14	To get rid of rheumatism.
4.	Hriday Mondal	52	"	29	Family tradition.
5.	Anath Bagdi	32	Bagdi	9	To get rid of rheumatic pain.
6.	Arjun Bagdi	48	"	18	To cure the occasional delirium of his son.
7.	Rathu Bagdi	39	"	12	Family tradition.
8.	Hasu Bagdi	40	"	18	To cure colic pain.
9.	Gopal Bagdi	32	"	10	For curing venereal disease.
10.	Bharat Bagdi	28	"	9	Family tradition.
11.	Balaram Bagdi	49	"	19	For the recovery of children.
12.	Srimanta Bagdi	32	"	6	No clear motive.
13.	Bhupati Bagdi	40	"	12	To get rid of ill health.
14.	Bhupal Bagdi	38	"	11	For general welfare of the family.
15.	Deben Bagdi	28	"	7	Family tradition.
16.	Manohar Bagdi	37	"	9	—do—
17.	Prabhakar Dom	48	Dom	14	To cure the abnormality of his son.

18.	Lalu Dom	62	"	47	For curing skin disease.
19.	Nanda Dom	42	"	17	For general welfare of the family.
20.	Sudhir Dom	40	"	15	Family tradition.
21.	Mongal Dom	48	"	18	Divine instruction through dream.
22.	Dukhu Dom	32	"	10	Grandmother's intention.
23.	Gour Dom	41	"	13	No particular motive.
24.	Ajit Dom	27	"	9	Divine instruction through dream.
25.	Gadai Dom	25	"	8	For general family welfare.
26.	Bipadtaran Bauri	29	Bauri	10	Family tradition.
27.	Balaram Bauri	47	"	15	To cure mental disturbance.
28.	Bhudev Bauri	60	"	22	Family tradition.
29.	Damodar Bauri	56	"	12	As a gratefulness in miraculous escape in an accident.
30.	Lakshman Bauri	48	"	14	To cure a kind of skin disease.
31.	Joydev Bauri	37	"	12	No particular motive.
32.	Madhab Bauri	29	"	10	Family tradition.
33.	Amal Bauri	22	"	8	To cure pain in the neck.
34.	Bishnu Bauri	44	"	18	To cure venereal disease.

TABLE 7.3E : Particulars about the Bhaktyas—Village Tentulbandh

Serial No.	Name of <i>Bhaktyas</i>	Age (in years)	Caste affiliation	Duration of initiation (in years)	Motive behind initiation
1	2	3	4	5	6
1.	Hazari Mondal	59	Sadgop	26	Family tradition.
2.	Ambar Mondal	53	"	19	To get relief from mental troubles.
3.	Anil Mondal	48	"	12	To get rid of colic pain.
4.	Sarathi Mondal	32	"	5	For having children.
5.	Bipin Mondal	39	"	8	To win over a village clash.
6.	Sambhu Mondal	40	"	7	For the recovery of wife's health.
7.	Pabitra Mondal	30	"	5	To get a son.
8.	Betak Mondal	48	"	12	For general welfare of the family.
9.	Biplab Mondal	29	"	5	For peaceful conjugal life.
10.	Hriday Mondal	37	"	8	To cure asthma.
11.	Manindra Mondal	42	"	10	To cure partial paralysis of the left arm.
12.	Paran Bagdi	49	Bagdi	12	Divine instruction through dream.
13.	Kalpada Bagdi	40	"	8	To get rid of rheumatic pain.
14.	Ambujaksha Bagdi	47	"	10	To cure stomach pain.
15.	Barun Bagdi	34	"	7	To cure wife's sterility.
16.	Mahadev Bagdi	28	"	5	For having children.
17.	Nafar Bagdi	39	"	8	Family tradition.

18.	Parimal Bagdi	47	"	14	To get rid of piles.
19.	Rajani Bagdi	38	"	11	To cure occasional nasal bleeding.
20.	Madhab Dom	48	Dom	15	To cure rheumatic pain.
21.	Matilal Dom	37	"	10	Divine instruction through dream.
22.	Santilal Dom	35	"	8	For having children.
23.	Adhar Chandra Dom	47	"	12	To cure chronic dysentery.

TABLE 7.3F: Particulars about the Bhaktiyas—Village Lakshindarpur

Serial No.	Names of Bhaktiyas	Age (in years)	Caste affiliation	Duration of initiation (in years)	Motive behind initiation
1	2	3	4	5	6
1.	Hiralal Mondal	59	Sadgop	18	For general welfare of family.
2.	Abinash Mondal	62	"	22	For winning a case in the Court.
3.	Manmatha Mondal	50	"	12	To cure asthma.
4.	Gurudas Mondal	42	"	10	To cure pain in the chest.
5.	Sakti Mondal	39	"	8	To cure Fileria.
6.	Haridas Mondal	38	"	8	To get rid of colic pain.
7.	Dulal Mondal	30	"	5	For having children.
8.	Rabilal Mondal	48	"	12	To cure asthma.
9.	Lochan Mondal	37	"	9	Divine instruction through dream.
10.	Mongol Mondal	32	"	6	Family tradition.
11.	Sudhanya Mondal	46	"	11	To cure piles.
12.	Nilmadhab Mondal	43	"	6	To improve business condition.
13.	Gouranga Mondal	40	"	7	To get rid of mental disorder.
14.	Nalinikanta Mondal	51	"	12	To cure rheumatic pain.
15.	Habal Bagdi	52	Bagdi	10	Family tradition.
16.	Budhan Bagdi	50	"	7	—do—
17.	Kanikur Bagdi	47	"	8	To cure asthma.
18.	Luton Bagdi	31	"	5	For having children.

19.	Sukhen Bagdi	39	"	7	To cure sexual disease.
20.	Prabhakar Bagdi	47	"	11	To cure asthma.
21.	Bhuthor Bagdi	39	"	8	Divine command received in a dream.
22.	Abhiram Bagdi	46	"	10	To cure chronic pain in the waist.
23.	Mridul Bagdi	52	"	12	Family tradition.
24.	Lakshman Bagdi	37	"	7	For the cure of asthma.
25.	Lafar Bauri	42	Bauri	8	To cure epilepsy.
26.	Akshay Bauri	31	"	5	For having children.
27.	Bishu Bauri	38	"	7	For the maintenance of family peace.
28.	Mrinal Dom	29	Dom	5	For having children.
29.	Subir Dom	38	"	10	As a token of gratitude for the cure of bone fracture.

to enter into the temple and touch the objects of worship even if some of them belong to the untouchable section of the village community. On analysing the motives behind taking initiation as *Bhaktiyas* it has been seen that most of them, irrespective of castes and communities, come forward either to cure various diseases or as a token of gratitude for getting relief from diseases of various nature. There are other different motives also, but all are centred round the general well-being of the person or of the families. In this sphere everybody thinks in a parallel line, i.e., by dedicating themselves as *Bhaktiyas* they would get direct blessings from the deity which would help them in averting all sorts of troubles in life. Therefore, for a few days 199 *Bhaktiyas* belonging to 16 castes of different villages think and work in a unified way after shedding off their individual and caste-level way of life. A common villager looks at the *Bhaktiyas* as a part of the deity and during this no caste affiliation or economic position is taken into consideration.

The *Baneswar* is regarded as an essential element of *Dharmaraj puja*. It has got a direct relationship with the *Bhaktiyas* who take the *Baneswar* on their shoulders and perform certain ceremonies before doing anything after their initiation. From the general behaviour it seems that the *Baneswar* is the replica of *Dharmaraj*. The wooden body and the attached iron nails of *Baneswar* is ceremonially prepared through traditional system of caste and service as summarized in Table 7.4. It is seen that two particular caste-groups like Sutradhar and Karmakar take essential roles in the preparation of *Baneswar*. They receive ceremonial payments from the organizers of the worship which are mostly in kinds but some cash are also given together with the payments in kind. The fact that the *Baneswar* possesses special quality of implanting fertility in sterile organisms^a is very much prevalent in the different villages. People belonging to various castes and communities collect the bathing water of *Baneswar* during the latter's stroll through the village paths and then it is sprinkled at the root of the sterile plants in order to get productions from these (Sarkar, 1965: 74). Sometimes the fertility-laden bathing water is sprinkled over the sterile cows, goats, sheep, etc. There are occasions when issueless married women belonging to different castes assemble at the tank, at the time of ceremonial bath of *Baneswar* to get some quantity of

TABLE 7.4: Preparation of Baneswar and Caste Participation

Name of villages	Preparation of the wooden slab	Remunerations	Supply of iron nails	Remuneration
1	2	3	4	5
Tantipara Hat-tala	Manik Sutradhar (Carpenter)	Rs. 2.00 in cash, two seers of rice	Nagen Karmakar	Rs. 3.00 in cash, one betel and a betel-nut.
Tantipara Dhanyakuna	Mongal Sutradhar	Rs. 2.00 in cash, two seers of rice and a napkin	Haridas Karmakar	Rs. 3.00 in cash, one <i>sidhaa</i> —one seer of rice, $\frac{1}{4}$ seer pulses and vegetables.
Metela	Chandra Madhab Sutradhar	One chopped off head of sacrificed goat/sheep	Paran Chandra Karmakar	One chopped off head of sacrificed goat/ sheep.
Ekabbarpur	Biman Chandra Sutradhar	One seer of rice, Rs. 2.00 in cash	Rajen Karmakar	One <i>sidhaa</i> consisting of two seers rice, vegetables and $\frac{1}{4}$ seer pulses.
Tentulbandh	Hriday Chandra Sutradhar	5 seers of paddy and 50 paise in cash.	Brajadass Karmakar	5 seers paddy and Re. 1.00 in cash.
Lakshindarpur	Amar Chandra Sutradhar	Rs. 4.00 in cash	Nishapati Karmakar	Rs. 3.00 in cash and a napkin.

bathing water of *Baneswar* to be sprinkled over their bodies in the hope of implanting fertility. It is firmly believed that those sterile women, who get the opportunity to touch the first drop of bathing water that rolls down the *Baneswar* slab after it is raised from water in the tank by the bath-taker, are blessed with requisite fertility for producing children. Therefore, during *Dharmaraj puja* festivals in these villages people belonging to different castes and classes behave in a similar manner in asking for the help of *Baneswar* for procuring fertility.

The performance of bringing *bhnral*⁹ by the *Bhaktyas* from the village liquor booth in a dancing procession accompanied by incessant drum-beat presents a practical aspect of intermingling of different caste-groups and intermixtures of Vedic and non-Vedic thoughts and ideas. Playing with pitcherful of rice-beer is no doubt a non-Vedic aspect of the festival and the Brahmin priests of *Dharmaraj* keep themselves away during this particular performance. But since it is regarded as one of the essential features of *Dharmaraj puja* nobody puts any objection to it, rather the higher caste-groups silently accept it and join, though indirectly, in the various stages of the performance. Table 7.5 presents an integrated picture of the services rendered by the different castes and their subsequent remunerations during the bringing of *bhnral*. The artisan caste like Kumbhakar is directly related with the supply of earthen pots to the *Bhaktyas*, and the distiller caste, like Sunri, supply required quantity of rice-beer specially prepared with due sanctity. Their remunerations are tradition-bound and everybody feels it a pleasure to be requested by the organizers of the *puja* to supply the essential materials for the purpose of worship of *Dharmaraj* (Sarkar, 1968: 261). The performance of bringing *bhnral* is attended by a large number of people belonging to high and low castes as it is believed that the god *Dharmaraj* exerts his influence on the *Bhaktyas* carrying *bhnral* in a solemn manner and it is a great occasion for many persons to approach the possessed *Bhaktyas* for getting god's grace. It is a very common affair to ask number of questions to the *Bhaktyas* thus possessed by *Dharmaraj* and the people belonging to all castes and communities come down to pray for god's blessings through the *Bhaktyas*. A childless woman unhesitatingly lies down at the feet of the 'possessed' *Bhaktya* for being blessed with a child. No age or caste bar is

TABLE 7.5 : Ceremony of Bhanral, Participation of Different Castes and Subsequent Remunerations

Name of villages	Supply of earthen pots or <i>bhanr</i>	Caste affiliation	Remunerations	Supply of <i>hanria</i> handia	Castes affiliation	Remunerations
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Tantipara Hat-tala	Rakha Hari Das	Kumbhakar	10 paise per pot and one betel leaf and a betel-nut	Haren Saha, proprietor of liquor booth	Sunri	One chopped off head of sacrificed goat, Rs. 3.00 in cash and 5 seers of rice.
Tantipara Dhanyakuna	Lakshman Das	Kumbhakar	10 paise per pot and one betel leaf and a betel-nut	Haren Saha	Sunri	10 seers of rice, Rs. 2.00 in cash and a napkin.
Metela	Haridas Laik	Kumbhakar	One <i>poa</i> of rice per pot	Patitpaban Sou Mondal	Sunri	A token payment of 25 paise, one betele leaf and a betel-nut.
Ekabbarpur	Potters of Tantipara Hat	Kumbhakar	Purchased—25 paise per pot	Bhupendra Nath Saha	Sunri	2 seers parboiled rice, vegetables, vermillion, one betel, a betel-nut and a few coins.

(Contd.)

TABLE 7.5—Contd.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Tentulbandh	Manik Chandra Das	Kumbhakar	One <i>poa</i> rice, one betel and a betel-nut	Haren Saha	Sunri	50 paise for fill- ing each pot.
Lakshindarpur	Palan Chandra Das	Kumbhakar	One seer of paddy per pot	Madhusudan Sau Mondal	Sunri	Potful paddy, one betel, one betel-nut and 25 paise from each <i>Bhaktya</i> .

seen to play during this self-dedication of the barren women. There are occasions when the sick old men and women suffering from different diseases kneel down before the young *Bhaktyas* with folded hands to seek remedies by which they may get relief from their continuous ailments. In Metela village a few pots are filled up with milk in place of rice-beer though there is no difference between the performances of two types of *bhnral*. Generally the higher caste *Bhaktyas* take the *dudh-bhnral* or pots filled with milk. It is a latter introduction and in places where Brahminical influence has been able to exert its influence considerably the instance of *dudh-bhnral* is to be seen.

The performance of *Yajna*, which is an essential part of *Dharmaraj puja* and is conducted through purely sanskritized procedure, highlights a neat picture of caste and service pattern based on age-old tradition. It has already been mentioned in the previous chapter that the performance of *Yajna* is always attended by the people belonging to higher castes sitting very close to it, whereas the lower caste people pay due devotion from distant place. Yet there are occasions when all the people irrespective of castes and classes become similarly interested. Table 7.6 gives the systematic picture of performance of various stages of *Yajna* at different shrines of *Dharmaraj* with the service and remuneration patterns in respect of the traditional workers with different caste affiliations. All these persons get due reception from the organizers of the festival and their services are gratefully acknowledged through customary procedures. In the Table in question the minor details of *Yajna* performance starting from clearance of the *Yajna* site up to the concluding jobs have been put forward in which a number of persons belonging to the different castes work jointly to reach the common goal. They consider these activities not only as their sacred duties but also these are regarded as the familial tradition that have been kept running through generations. During worship of the sacred fire a few fruits like ripe banana, cucumber, betel-nut are offered by the priest after smearing these with *ghee*. There is a belief that these half-burnt fruits have got tremendous fertility effect if these are taken by the barren women with due devotion to the deity. It is commonly seen that a large number of people belonging to all castes assemble at the *Yajna* site to have some portions of these dedicated fruits. The Brahmin priests always

ask *mul-Bhaktiyas* to find out the burnt fruit remains from the fire of the *Yajna* and distribute these to the needy persons.

The performance of *dandi*¹⁰ attracts a large number of males and females belonging to various castes. Generally they observe this particular rite with the hope of getting relief from troubles in life or a token of gratitude to the deity after they have secured success in any kind of work. It is seen that on the day of *Yajna* performance a large number of persons start offering *dandi* or prostration from the tank where *Baneswar* takes his bath to the shrine. It is an exhausting and painstaking affair. The devotee stands up and with his folded hands he calls the deity with reverence. Then he makes himself prostrate over the ground. In this position his breast and face touch the ground, whereas his arms are outstretched in the front direction. His attendant draws a line with the help of a cane stick at the extended finger tips. The devotee gets up and walks up to that mark. He then prostrates himself again on the ground after praying in the name of *Dharmaraj*. In this way the whole distance is to be covered. It is firmly believed that this sort of physical penance draws the sympathy of *Dharmaraj* and ultimately he becomes satisfied with the deep devotion of the man concerned. People belonging to all sections consider it a pious duty to observe directly the performance of *dandi* and in almost all the cases the observers become merged, of course psychologically, with the activities of the *dandi*-givers. This naturally helps in bringing a united appeal and unified mode of behaviour in the perspective of *dandi* performance. Table 7.7 gives the detailed information of the performers of *dandi* who belong to 10 different castes coming from 21 villages in and around the five different shrines of *Dharmaraj* studied. The performers of *dandi* belong to all ages, sexes and castes. But this is greatly seen amongst the lower caste people.

It is to be noted with due importance that the villagers irrespective of castes and communities subscribe equally to the different mythological stories centering round the origin and development of different village deities. A number of such stories have already been discussed, in detail, elsewhere in this work. It is felt that all such stories are based on the united appeal of the mass to propitiate the deities after they (the deities) have been able to show their power through supernatural ways. They have to establish their special prowess through the performance of

TABLE 7.6 : Various Stages of the Performance of Yajna, Nature of Caste Participation and Remuneration

Name of villages	Clearance of Yajna site	Caste and Remuneration	Supply of wooden faggots	Caste and Remuneration	Supply of ghee	Caste and Remuneration	Supply of essential herbs	Caste and Remuneration	Organization of the performance	Caste and Remuneration	Supervision of the whole performance	Caste and Remuneration
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Tantipara Hat-tala	Mitun Das	Tantubaya. One <i>sidhaa</i> consisting of two seers rice, $\frac{1}{2}$ seer pulses, vegetables and 25 paise	Kripa Sindhu Sutradhar	Sutradhar. 2 pies of rice, 50 paise in cash	Budhan Chandra Mondal	Sadgop. Plateful of <i>prasad</i>	Monohar Chakravorty	Grahacharya. 3 pies of rice, one betel, betel-nut, one sacred thread and 50 paise in cash	Sashtipada Roy	Brahmin. Rs. 5.00 in cash, one cloth, one <i>sidhaa</i> , one sacred thread	Puja Committee	Tantubaya, Brahmin, Moyra and Kumbhakar Honorary
Tantipara Dhanyakuna	Byomkesh Das	Tantubaya. One <i>sidhaa</i> consisting of 2 seers of rice, $\frac{1}{2}$ seer pulses, vegetables and 25 paise	Haren Sutradhar	Sutradhar. 3 pies of rice, one napkin	Harish Chandra Mondal	Sadgop. One <i>sidhaa</i> , $\frac{1}{2}$ seer rice, $\frac{1}{2}$ seer pulses, vegetables, some sweets	Nafar Chandra Chakravorty	Grahacharya. One <i>sidhaa</i> consisting of two pies of rice, $\frac{1}{2}$ pies pulses, vegetables and a few coins	Prafulla Roy	Brahmin. Rs. 5.00 in cash and a small <i>sidhaa</i>	Puja Committee	Tantubaya, Brahmin, Moyra
Metela	Madan Mondal	Goala. One cloth, fruits and sweets	Madan Mondal	Goala. One plate <i>prasad</i>	Sashtipada Roy	Brahmin. One cloth, one plate <i>prasad</i>	Murari Chakravorty	Grahacharya. 2 seers of rice, one sacred thread, betel and betel-nut	Samiran Roy	Brahmin. Rs. 3.00 in cash, one <i>sidhaa</i> one cloth, betel and betel-nut	Village headman, Mathan Gope	Goala. Honorary
Ekabbarpur	Bhakti Bhuson Mondal	Mahishya Honorary	Mahadeb Chakravorty	Grahacharya. 3 pies of rice and 50 paise in cash	Bibhuti Mondal	Mahishya. Enjoys productions from 3 kathas of agricultural land	Mahadeb Chakravorty	Grahacharya. 2 pies of rice and 25 paise in cash	Sankar Adhikari	Brahmin. One cloth, one napkin, one <i>sidhaa</i> and one rupee in cash	Bhakti Bhuson Mondal	Mahishya. Honorary
Tentulbandh	Hitendra Nath Mondal	Sadgop. One <i>sidhaa</i> , one plateful of <i>prasad</i>	Sudev Mondal	Sadgop. One <i>sidhaa</i> , fruits and sweets	Anil Baran Das	Tantubaya. One napkin and one <i>sidhaa</i>	Sahadev Chakravorty	Grahacharya. One <i>sidhaa</i> , one sacred thread betel and betel-nut	Anath Roy	Brahmin. One chopped off head of the sacrificed goat/sheep	Binoi Mandal	Sadgop. Honorary
Lakshindarpur	Madhab Chandra Sutradhar	Sutradhar. One <i>sidhaa</i> , fruits and sweets	Upen Chandra Mondal	Sadgop. 2 pies of rice and 1 pie of pulses	Madhab Mukherjee	Brahmin. One <i>sidhaa</i> and one napkin	Parimal Chakravorty	Grahacharya. 2 seers of rice, vegetables, betel and betel-nut	Muktipada Chatterjee	Brahmin. 5 seers of rice, one napkin, one sacred thread, betel and a betel-nut	Narayan Mandal	Sadgop. Honorary

TABLE 7.7 : Particulars about the Participants in Dandi Performance

Sl. No.	Name	Age	Sex	Caste	Village	Shrine where observed	Distance between perform's village and shrine	Purpose
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1.	Gadadhar Bagdi	65	M	Bagdi	Ranigram	Tantipara: Hat-tala	6 km	To cure mental trouble.
2.	Haripada Das	59	M	Tantubaya	Tantipara	-do-	Same village	For general family welfare.
3.	Mahadeb Das	39	M	Muchi	Rajnagar	-do-	10 km	To get children.
4.	Basini Dasi	42	F	-do-	-do-	Tantipara: Dhanya-kuna	10 km	To cure colic pain.
5.	Balaram Bauri	46	M	Bauri	Gohaliara	-do-	1 km	To cure asthma.
6.	Haren Surradhar	38	M	Surradhar	Chandrapur	-do-	5 km	To get relief from frequent fever.
7.	Golapi Dom	31	F	Dom	Muktipur	-do-	3 km	To cure female disease.
8.	Basanti Bauri	38	F	Bauri	Metela	Metela	Same village	To cure colic pain.
9.	Gosain Bauri	49	M	Bauri	-do-	-do-	-do-	To cure chronic asthma.
10.	Mohum Dom	58	M	Dom	Ekabbarpur	-do-	5 km	To cure venereal disease.
11.	Kshudiram Mondal	46	M	Sadgop	Kistapur	-do-	7 km	To get relief from severe rheumatism.
12.	Dharam Saha	32	M	Sunri	Palasban	-do-	9 km	To get children.
13.	Abani Dom	47	M	Dom	Bansboni	-do-	6 km	To ward off evil spirits from house.

(Contd.)

TABLE 7.7—Contd.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
14.	Chandani Bauri	29	F	Bauri	Bhanra	Metela	3 km	To get children.
15.	Monohar Das	46	M	Muchi	Khaerbon	-do-	5 km	To cure chronic skin disease.
16.	Mukti Mal	32	F	Mal	Rajgang	-do-	6 km	To get children.
17.	Ramani Lohar	30	F	Lohar	Jhanpartala	-do-	2 km	To cure female disease.
18.	Madhai Dom	47	M	Dom	Palasban	Ekabbar-	3 km	For his mother's recovery
						pur		from illness.
19.	Paku Bagdi	39	M	Bagdi	Ekabbarpur	-do-	Same village	To get rid of evil spirits.
20.	Gopal Mondal	46	M	Sadgop	-do-	-do-	-do-	To cure chronic asthma.
21.	Nayan Bagdi	31	M	Bagdi	Parasia	Tentul-	2 km	To cure eye troubles.
						bandh		
22.	Bhubon Karmakar	39	M	Karmakar	Ranigram	-do-	4 km	To cure chronic asthma.
23.	Sukhdev Bauri	32	M	Bauri	Rajganj	-do-	6 km	To get children.
24.	Badal Das	33	M	Muchi	Muktipur	-do-	3 km	To get children.
25.	Kuruni Bauri	62	F	Bauri	Banstoni	-do-	8 km	To cure mental disorder of
								her only son.
26.	Pankhi Mal	34	M	Mal	Radhanagar	-do-	9 km	To get children.
27.	Bhabataran Lohar	46	M	Lohar	Koridhya	Lakshin-	2 km	To cure colic pain.
						darpur		
28.	Prabhakar Dom	39	M	Dom	Lakshindarpur	-do-	Same village	To recover physical strength.
29.	Sadananda Bauri	42	M	Bauri	Churmuro	-do-	2 km	To cure old pain in the chest.

certain splendid activities and in consequence of which the people have come forward to arrange for adoring them for fear of their life and also as a token of gratitude to them, The *chadak* tree¹¹ of Metela village is shrouded with such type of beliefs that the inhabitants of the surrounding villages look at the *chadak* tree with reverential attitude and everybody, irrespective of castes and classes, possesses a deep faith in it. The invocation ceremony of the *chadak* tree conducted by the *Bhaktyas* is attended by a large number of persons including the tribal people coming from distant villages in the Santal Pargana district. On reaching the embankment of the tank the *Bhaktyas* loudly praise in the name of *Dharmaraj*. The *mul-Bhaktya* bows down in great reverence to the immersed *chadak* tree. He asks for divine permission to pull out the *chadak* tree from the water of the tank. It is believed that after a few minutes' attempt he gets it and then he declares it in a loud voice. As soon as he declares, other *Bhaktyas* jump in the water and search out the wooden log. The heavy and long wooden log is then pulled out by combined effort. It is a very opportune moment and the people seeing this joint enterprise of the *Bhaktyas* become overwhelmed with joy and surprise; they begin to bow down before the *chadak* tree, which they consider as the living embodiment of *Dharmaraj*. The *chadak* tree of Metela village is really a wonder in itself. It is very difficult to assess the actual age of the *chadak* tree. The oldest inhabitant, Sri Saranan Roy, of the village has said that his father used to tell him the great antiquity of this robust wooden log and he has been observing it since his boyhood days. This wooden log remains immersed in water of *Nayabandh* and it is firmly believed that nobody can be able to feel it even after ransacking the water of the tank in question. There is a popular belief that as soon as the *Bhaktyas* invite it ceremonially the wooden log becomes traceable, otherwise it remains concealed in the water. This age-old *chadak* tree is a living force and the common village folk are of opinion that its various activities are governed by spiritual procedures. Numerous supernatural happenings in village life are explained as the direct influence of the *chadak* tree which is enforced with some hidden qualities. The *chadak* tree must not be touched or even disturbed when it takes rest under water all the year round. The villagers have a reverential attitude inspired by awe towards this *chadak* tree

and it has implanted firm roots in the minds of the villagers in consequence of a number of incidents. A widow belonging to the Bagdi community happened to touch the *chadak* tree during her taking bath in the tank. She narrated the happening to the fellow-villagers and they were very much panicky. It was seen that the woman concerned was afflicted with leprosy and within a year she died. Balen Kaivarta, the fisherman, was fishing in the tank and suddenly he felt that the net was entangled in some object. He wanted to feel the situation with his legs and was frightened to find that the object was nothing but the *chadak* tree. In due course he was attacked with a bad sore on his leg. Being very much disheartened, he went to the Lord Baidyanath at Deoghar and spent the whole day praying before him. He was subsequently directed by the Lord Baidyanath to ask for apology from *Dharmaraj* of Metela. Immediately he returned to his village and approached the priest of *Dharmaraj* who gave him advice to promise one he-goat for sacrifice during the worship of *Dharmaraj*. Eventually he was cured. These incidents still pulsate in the minds of the villagers and which strengthened the faith towards supernatural influence exerted by the *chadak* tree.

The famous hook-swinging ceremony of the *Bhaktiyas* during *Dharmaraj puja* at Metela village creates a common platform for all castes and communities belonging not only to the neighbouring region but also to the numerous people from distant places. People from far and near attend the ceremony for the purpose of not only enjoying it but also offer deep regard to the god of *chadak*. All the different stages of this performance are keenly observed by the people belonging to various castes, classes and communities from the very beginning and during this socio-psychological integration of thoughts and ideas of the various grades of people becomes very prominent. All the people, rich or poor, high or low, young or old are totally influenced by the various stages of the ceremony and naturally they remain completely concentrated to this ceremony. It is customary to get formal permission of the deity for starting the fierce activities relating to *chadak*. The *mul-Bhaktiya* kneels down before *Dharmaraj* after placing a lotus on His head. *Dharmaraj* is prayed for blessings by the *mul-Bhaktiya* in association with his fellow *Bhaktiyas*. The blessings come in the form.

of falling off of the lotus from the head of *Dharmaraj*.¹² The *chadak* is not started until the particular flower falls down. As soon as it is effected, the *mul-Bhaktya* orders the village blacksmith to start piercing the back of the *Bhaktyas* for hook-swinging device. The participating *Bhaktyas* are provided with garlands of *gulancha* flower on their heads and necks. The village blacksmith and his assistant take their seats at the middle of the *natmandir*. He brings with him two large-sized kerosene lamps, two sharp needles and a large number of specially prepared iron hooks. He then instructs the *Bhaktyas* to lie down serially before him to get their back pierced. The participating *Bhaktyas* lie down over the abdomen in front of the blacksmith, who, with the help of his assistant, begins to pierce the flesh of the back and two iron hooks are fitted to these. The village blacksmith claims a new napkin from the *Bhaktyas* who are participating for the first time. The *Bhaktyas* provided with hooks on their backs are then carried on shoulders to the *chadak* tree. The top of the *chadak* tree is provided with a cross-piece and from the two ends of which two long strings hang. The hooks at the back of the *Bhaktya* are tied to the string at one end and the other string is held by a number of *Bhaktyas*. The whole weight of the body of the hook-swinging *Bhaktya* is thus carried by the two hooks pierced in the flesh of the back. There is no other support to supplement the hooks. The *Bhaktyas* holding the string begin to rotate the cross pole as fast as they can which makes the hanging body move in a whirling manner at the level of 50 feet from the ground.¹³ Really it is an unparallel scene—a mixture of fear, surprise and devotional attitude characterize the whole situation. A vast number of people belonging to the different castes and tribal communities encircle the *chadak* tree to witness the various feats organized by the *Bhaktyas*. It is considered as a pious activity to attend the *chadak* festival and to observe the self-castigations in front of *Darmaraj*. It has been observed that many weak-nerved people stay at a distant place from the *chadak* tree as they cannot bear the strains of witnessing such dreadful flesh-piercing activities. The *mul-Bhaktya* supervises the whole process and his instructions are minutely followed by the co-*Bhaktyas*. It is firmly believed that no mishap would occur if the *Bhaktya* concerned strictly observes the different restrictions that have been imposed in this connection. The

extensive and critical enquiry reveals that any unfortunate happening in the observance of this dangerous feat, any case of septic or tetanus has never occurred. It is the God's grace, the people believe, which helps in the smooth and trouble-free performance of the ceremony. In the year 1975 when I, accompanied by a few friends of mine, was witnessing the whirling movement of the swinging *Bhaktyas* in front of the *chadak* tree, a mishap took place and it was a very dangerous affair. I stood by the side of the *mul-Bhaktya*, who helped me in studying the whole situation. At that particular time I was very busy in taking snaps after snaps with the help of flash-gun. Everything was usual, surrounding spectators were very much delighted to see the successful feats of *chadak*. All of a sudden a noise was heard and the surrounding people became bewildered, they were panic-stricken. The *mul-Bhaktya* could understand the situation and he told me that the swinging *Bhaktya* has been dropped off while he was in full motion. The information naturally puzzled me; certainly the flesh of the back where the hooks were set had been torn and the severe blow on the ground created a hazardous situation. I was surprised to see that the *mul-Bhaktya* did not change for a moment. He instructed the next man to start swinging and it was done immediately. Meanwhile the *mul-Bhaktya* told me that the *Bhaktya* who fell down did not maintain restricted life prescribed for the *Bhaktyas*, otherwise that unfortunate situation would not have been resulted. There were some passing remarks from the spectators that the taking of snaps with flash-gun might be the cause of that mishap. It was not liked by *Dharmaraj* as keeping of records of these activities through photographs went against the norms of the ritual. Whatever may be the fact, that very remark, though thrown in a loose manner, made me worried. But the *mul-Bhaktya*, who was all along by my side, did not pay any heed to it and he asked me to take more snaps to fulfil my need. Suddenly the fallen *Bhaktya* approached me and showing the back he wanted to convince me and other persons that the muscles were intact. His fall from the *chadak* tree was not due to the tearing of muscles but the strings by which the hooks were tied up had been torn off. The tearing of muscles at the time of swinging on the *chadak* tree is regarded as a great offence and if it happens, it is thought that the *Bhaktya*

concerned has violated some essential norms of the ceremony. Such *Bhaktyas* are looked down upon by their fellow-men as well as the general public.¹⁴

On completion of swinging performance by all the *Bhaktyas*, *mul-Bhaktya* bows down before the *chadak* tree and asks forgiveness for any unknown sin that might have been committed during the *chadak* performance. A few *Bhaktyas* are engaged in fanning the *Dharmaraj* in the temple to cool him down. It is extensively believed that during the whole period of excessive painstaking feat like swinging on the *chadak* tree by the *Bhaktyas* *Dharmaraj* regularly perspires as sweat drops are often visible on the surface of the black slab representing the deity. On the next morning the *chadak* tree is uprooted and it is placed horizontally on the ground. It requires a joint effort by a large number of *Bhaktyas*. The Brahmin priest performs worship for a short duration. A large number of people reach the embankment of the tank for showing due regard to the famous *chadak* tree. It is then thrown to the water of the tank by a sudden jerk. As soon as it is immersed in the tank attending men, women and children take some quantity of water from the tank to sprinkle over their heads.

Dharmraj puja festival binds the people together not only through supernatural beliefs and practices but also it attempts successfully to exert an influence of integrating thoughts and ideas of the variegated caste and communities through the performance of grotesque spectacles arranged by the *Bhaktyas* of two centres—Dhanyakuna and Hat-tala—of Tantipara village. All the *Bhaktyas* and other interested persons of the village participate in the grotesque activities which very often continue for two or three days. During the first night the fun and amusement reach its maximum. This type of grotesque spectacular performance is the special characteristic feature of *Dharmaraj* worship at Tantipara. The *Bhaktyas* make different groups with the help of other villagers and each group receives make-up according to the central theme of the scene to be displayed. Sometimes special and attractive scenes from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata are selected and the parties concerned dress them accordingly. The scenes are arranged on the bullock carts decorated with coloured paper-flowers, chains together with smaller twigs of mango and *neem* trees. All the participants

are made well-versed in the general layout of the whole scheme which is conducted by a few specialists of the village. The conductors of the different comical troupes arrange the whole scene to be focused and then select the players from amongst the villagers. Those who do not actively participate in the comedian troupes help the conductors in the different essential activities like the arrangement for bringing of bullock carts from their owners, decoration of these carts, collection of subscriptions, to write posters that are required for displaying the scenes, etc. Some persons are seen to be deeply engaged in green rooms who work as per direction of the conductors. The comedian troupes ride on the bullock carts specified for each of these and then display the theme as previously arranged. The bullock carts are then pulled by the villagers themselves. A keen competition is seen between the two comedian troupes of two centres of worship—Dhanyakuna and Hat-tala. The bullock carts carrying comedian troupes from one centre go to the other and there they perform the actual show. People belonging to various castes and communities flock together to witness the different feats of the organizers. During this period men, women and children come to this village from far off places to enjoy the grotesque spectacles of diverse nature. Sometimes prizes and medals are declared by the influential villagers for best performances.

The rural folk consider it as a great opportunity to enjoy with amusement the different comedian devices which gather subject-matters not only from the ancient literatures but also from the very recent socio-political affairs. It is common to focus the different social events centering round family clashes and quarrels in an appropriate way. Inter-village affairs of the surrounding region are also depicted through these scenes. These lead to profound laughter and a pleasant diversion in the monotonous village life. A veteran player in these comedian performances named Sri Motilal De, aged 82, opines that these are not for mere entertainment but act as a realistic medium of mass education through enjoyment. It is the only occasion through which the weal and the woe of village life can be analysed publicly. Sri Shyam Patitundi, a 15-year old novice player, is of opinion that these comedian devices are characterized by tremendous importance in village life. These help young prospective players to get themselves acquainted with the planning

and organization of dramatic performances based on mythological as well as realistic events of their day-to-day life.

Really the wit and wisdom of village folk are found to be reflected in the overall contrivance and giving final shape to the different scenes over the bullock carts. The preparations for these dramatic performances are generally taken at least two months before the actual happenings. During this whole period the participants belonging to all age-groups, castes and classes assemble at a common place in the evening to chalk out the whole programme. Various discussions are held, different suggestions and advice are taken from the experienced persons of the locality to make the programme a grand success. The intellectual fight between the organizers and supporters of two centres of worship at Tantipara village dates back to a remote period and this healthy competition on cultural life of the village deserves special consideration. It is a novel achievement conducted by the village folk in connection with a religious festival and it is nowhere to be found in such an elaborate and picturesque manner. Mention may be made that this particular performance is going on unabated through the ages in spite of abrupt changes in the day-to-day life and activities of the people. During this performance not only Tantipara village with seventeen castes feel itself united through a common purpose but also the villagers of the region find it a pleasure to participate in and enjoy the ceremony centred round the worship of *Dharmaraj*.

Caste and class integration finds a better illustration during the performances of Chandi at Metela and Lauberia villages. The *Deyashis* of these two deities belong to the lower section and they are regarded as untouchables in the orthodox Hindu way of life. These people are very poor and their misery in day-to-day life knows no bound. Naturally, they belong to the very lower class. But this caste and class barrier vanishes when the *Deyashis* belonging to Bauri caste propitiate Chandi—the roaring deity of the region. Though these two deities of two different places are actually the family deities of the Bauris, yet through a process of universalization conditioned by widespread legends and various other miraculous activities these deities have been able to find their places in the minds of the general people. From the modes of behaviour of the people belonging to different villages, castes and communities, at the time of worship of

these deities, it is seen that everybody even the people belonging to the Brahmin caste look at the Bauri *Deyashi* with veneration. Almost all the higher caste members attend the shrines to observe the different stages of the festival and thereby to pay homage to the deities. During annual festivals of the deities an interesting picture of village level participation is noticed. It is customary for the *Deyashis* to send formal invitation to the headmen concerned of not only the residing villages of the deities but to the different other villages with which the deities have got some sort of connection. It is commonly seen that the *faridis* from far and near bring varieties of offerings like parboiled rice, vegetables, new clothes, napkins, sweets, etc., and all these are arranged systematically at the vicinity of the shrine. A large number of persons belonging to higher castes and enlightened groups attend the ceremony who sit down at the shrine side by side with the illiterate rural folk. A considerable enthusiasm is noticed amongst the devotees specially who have come here with the particular intention of getting relief from the danger of disease. They anxiously wait for the opportune moment when the *Deyashi* can be approachable for the purpose of getting his advice.

At the time of receiving medicine from the *Deyashi* all the devotees belonging to various castes and classes become united in the background of the belief pattern that has wound round the indigenous medicinal system. Before that all the participants and observers in the ceremony are supplied with *prasad* consisting of flattened rice, soaked in water and mixed with molasses. On taking this *prasad* the fasting villagers break their day-long vow. In the evening there are arrangements of grand feasts when all the devotees, *faridis* and members of the *Deyashi* community dine side by side without any discrimination. The night is passed through the singing of folk songs of different varieties. Generally the popular folk drama of the region, *Letogan*¹⁵, is arranged for recreation of the mass when large number of men, women and children become delighted to see and hear the interesting and melodious feats organized by the recreational troupes. In this way the whole day and night is passed with full satisfaction, and enjoyment, and the rural folk belonging to all ages, sexes, castes and communities find themselves in an atmosphere of devotion, duty and fraternity.

Tables 7.8 and 7.8A pin-point the nature of caste, service and remuneration pattern during the different stages of the festival of annual worship at their own shrines.

These indicate a neat pattern of participation of diverse castes and classes of the villages concerned in the observance of annual festival of Chandi belonging to the Bauri community. Mention may be made that this pattern of participation is strictly traditional and nobody interferes into the affair of others. What is more important in this pattern is that being an untouchable caste and occupying the lower rung in the village social ladder the Bauri organisers receive a prominent place in the socio-religious affairs of the villages centering round the propitiation of Chandi.

Mongal Chandi of Khairadihi prepares a platform for integration of castes and communities of not only her own village but the people belonging to other surrounding villages become

TABLE 7.8 : Caste, Service and Remuneration during Chandi Worship at Metela

Caste Groups	Service Pattern	Nature of Remuneration
1	2	3
Bauri	Organization of worship	5 seers of rice and one napkin
Bauri	Clearance and decoration of the shrine	2 seers of rice
Goala	Formal management	Honorary
Sadgop	Arrangement of formal invitation	Honorary
Dom	To play on drums	Rs. 10.00 in cash and 5 seers of rice
Bagdi	To help the organizers during animal sacrifice	Two chopped off heads of sacrificed goats
Sutradhar	Distribution of <i>prasad</i>	Honorary
Moyra/ confectioner	Plucking of flower	One plateful of <i>prasad</i>
Mal and Bagdi	House to house collection of rice	2 or 3 chopped off heads of sacrificed goats

TABLE 7.8A : Caste, Service and Remuneration during Chandi Worship at Lauberia

Caste Groups	Service Pattern	Nature of Remuneration
1	2	3
Sadgop Brahmin	Organization of worship Offering of sacred thread to the deity	Honorary One potful of milk
Kayastha Bagdi	Management Clearing of the place of worship	Honorary One seer of rice
Dom	Intimation of the date to the villagers	One seer of rice
Dom	To play music	Rs. 6.00 in cash and two seers of rice
Bauri	House to house collection of rice	One chopped off head of sacrificed goat
Moyra/ confectioner	Distribution of <i>prasad</i>	Honorary
Napit/barber	Plucking of flower	One plateful of <i>prasad</i>

fused into a compact unit during the propitiation of Mongal Chandi. The pattern of worship of Mongal Chandi is so arranged that it requires the participation of different caste-groups and the persons concerned take it as their sacred duty to co-operate with the traditional system. Table 7.9 would illustrate the integrated pattern of caste participation during the various stages of the performance of annual worship.

On the occasion of worship each household of the village and other surrounding region sends offerings consisting of sun-dried rice, wafer of molasses, betel, betel-nut and vermilion. Besides these some offerings also reach the shrine in the form of parboiled rice, pulses, vegetables together with cash from the well-to-do families. The Muslim communities of Khairadihi and surrounding villages regularly send offerings in cash. The day before actual worship of Mongal Chandi, *i.e.*, on the second Monday of the month of *Chaitra* (April-May) is extensively observed as the saltless day when the people, irrespective of

TABLE 7.9 : Nature of Caste Participation during the Annual Worship of Mongal Chandi at Khairadihi Village

Caste Participation	Service Pattern	Village affiliation
1	2	3
Brahmin	Worship, sanskritized aspects	Parasiya
Napit/barber	Bringing of Manasa	Tantipara
Sutradhar	Holding of umbrella	Khairadihi
Bagdi	Cleaning of the shrine	-do-
Dom	Playing of drums	Khairadihi and neighbouring villages
Brahmin	Bringing of clay horse from Gailaburi shrine	Parasiya
Tantubaya	Showing of <i>Mongalghot</i>	Khairadihi
Tantubaya	Organization of worship	-do-
Tantubaya	Performance of <i>Gachbera</i>	-do-
Kumbhakar/ potter	Supply of earthen vessels for making <i>ghots</i>	-do-
Napit/barber	Plucking of flowers	-do-
All castes	Supply of rice and vegetables	Khairadihi and other neighbouring villages
Brahmin	Preparation of <i>prasad</i>	Parasiya and other villages
Vaishnab	Performance of <i>Kirtan</i> songs	Khairadihi and neighbouring villages

castes, classes and religions take meals in which there is no salt. It has become a traditional custom. It is locally known as *nunpala* or abstaining from taking salt. This particular local custom is strictly observed by all the people throughout the whole region and all the dishes are prepared throughout the day without adding salt. As because *nunpala* is to be observed as a part of the deities propitiation, nobody is seen to neglect it. On the morning of the following day of *nunpala* it is customary for each household to offer small quantity of salt in a *sal* leaf at the shrine of Mongal Chandi. Nobody is allowed to resume the taking of salt until it is ceremonially offered to the deity.

From the day of invocation of the deity up to the final immersion of *bari* the different ceremonial functions are performed by a large number of persons who belong to the different castes living in Khairadihi and other surrounding villages. Owing to the tremendous impact of Mongal Chandi on the life of the people as a whole a unique trend of caste and class integration through various participations has been resulted here. The drummers of Mongal Chandi have got special significance. They attend the ceremony deliberately and play on drums or conduct musical performance without any remuneration. These musicians belong to different castes like Dom, Muchi and Bauri. They come from the different villages of the region and, it is reported, they do this voluntary job as a token of gratitude to the deity for her blessings in curing diseases or in saving them from such other acute situations.

The ceremony of *prasad* distribution amongst the people, irrespective of castes, classes and religions, is not only an essential part of the festival but also it makes the festival perfect in all respects. There are palatable items in the *prasad* such as hatchpotch, two types of vegetables, meat and *chatni*. All these items are prepared from the various offerings and sacrificed animals dedicated before the deity by her numerous devotees and *faridis*. A large number of persons sit side by side without any sort of discrimination and take *prasad* from *sal* leaf plates stretched over the ground. The participants gradually depart from the shrine after bowing down before the deity and contributing their mite to the general fund of the festival.

In the same evening *kirtan* performance is held in the *natmandir*. Reputed *kirtan* singers are invited from distant places and the performance is continued for nights together. In the day time *Chandi-Mongal* performance is arranged when the rural singers narrate the whole mythological background of Chandi's coming to the earth and her establishment as a goddess on this earth through song and music accompanied by the rhythmic movement on the body. These performances, as a natural consequence, give a considerable stir in the more or less stagnant village life. Not only so, the people belonging mostly to the illiterate community, find a broad horizon to talk and think about some pensive affairs with which they are not frequently accustomed.

Manasa, principally a serpent deity, has been able to secure a conspicuous position in the hearts of the people of the region which has already been evidenced by various facts in the earlier chapters. Chintamani Manasa of Joydev-Kenduli has exerted her influence over an extensive area and the people belonging to all castes, classes and religions admit this affair by their direct participation in the different stages of the festival. The people of the locality consider it as their sacred duty to send offerings to the deity on the day of worship and thereby ask for her blessings. Chintamani Manasa is very often ceremonially invited by the adjacent villagers during the time of breakout of any epidemic. At that time the people of the village concerned become united to arrange for worship of Chintamani Manasa. Generally it is seen that all the castes including the Brahmins come forward to contribute their mite towards this affair and also to render essential services at the various stages of the worship. The *Deyashi* of Chintamani Manasa, Bagdi by caste, finds a conspicuous position in the domain of religious life of the villages. During the time of worship the Brahmin priest of the village concerned does not hesitate to sit by the side of the Bagdi *Deyashi* and extends his co-operation in the smooth running of the ceremony. All the higher caste groups behave in the similar fashion.

Chintamani Manasa is ceremonially brought to the *Kadamkhandi ghat*¹⁶ of the Ajay river in a procession on *Pous-Sankranti* or the last day of the month of *Pous* (December-January) for worship. On this particular day the bank of the river Ajay becomes overcrowded with numerous devotees and common men to take holy bath at the celebrated *ghat* of *Kadamkhandi* of Joydeva fame. The village Kenduli where the shrine of Chintamani and the different temples of Vaishnava gods and goddesses are situated is flooded with people of all ages, sex, castes and communities. The large fair which has got direct association with the holy bath at *Kadamkhandi* is characterized by many specialized features. Kenduli village is visited by the large number of Bauls, belonging to a particular religious sect of Bengal whose philosophy of life is conditioned by the life-ways and thought-ways entirely devoted to their spiritual practices. The principal aim of Baul's life is to live in constant communion with his inner self in his own way. These Bauls gather on the

bank of the Ajay river and enjoy three-day long festival through dancing and singing. The devotees specially belonging to the Vaishnab sect attend the religious gathering and take holy bath in the Ajay river at the auspicious moment on *Makar-Sankranti*¹⁷ day. In the morning of this celebrated date the *Deyashi* of Chintamani with the help of his assistants and other members of the family brings out Chintamani and makes a round through the fair of Kenduli. The drum-beaters accompany the procession. During their tour through the fair the *Deyashi*, his assistants and other participants praise in the name of Chintamani. Many persons loitering in the fair show respect to Chintamani, offer *prauams* and contribute their mite on the large plate held by one of the assistants of the *Deyashi*. On completion of the tour round the fair Chintamani is placed on a specially-built altar at the *ghat* of *Kadamkhandi*. After sometime a special worship of Chintamani is conducted by the *Deyashi* himself. A large number of devotees coming from distant villages for having their holy bath on the occasion of *Makar-Sankranti* approach Chintamani and offer worship to her. Some of them offer coins on the cloth spread over in front of the altar or offer sun-dried rice on a bamboo basket put before the deity. The *Deyashi*, in return, gives them the blessings-oriented flowers or *bel* leaves from the throne of the deity. The drummers beat their drums beside the altar of Chintamani and thereby attract the bathers for making their offerings to the deity. A conspicuous gathering always encircles the altar of Chintamani at the *Kadamkhandi ghat* and observe the votive offerings made by various devotees belonging to different castes and classes.

The goddess Manasa at Bhanra, Tantipara and Metela villages possess similar influence in bringing all grades of people with diverse thoughts and ideas and in different socio-economic levels over the same platform of mutual understanding and fellow-feeling. The *bakapanchami* day (the day of annual worship of Manasa) at Bhanra readily creates such an atmosphere and the people belonging to different surrounding villages flock to the shrine neglecting the inaccessible nature of the village. Being a small village and mainly populated by the Bagdi caste it has become easier for the *Deyashi* community to exert an overall influence on the village as a whole. A large

number of persons from different villages gather at the *natmandir* of the deity. They belong to the different castes and communities. During their short stay there they get ample opportunity to talk amongst themselves and thereby they exchange their thoughts and ideas. During night the popular performance like *Manasa Mangal*—a song recital praising the glorified activities of Manasa—is held at *natmandir* when the villagers and all attending devotees and *furidls* pass the night with a glaring mood. Various splendid nature and activities as sketched through the melodious exposition of the singers enhance the faith and dependence of the audience composed of various grades of people.

The villagers of Tantipara observe the festival relating to the worship of Manasa without any class and caste discrimination. It is greatly reflected by the nature of participation of the people belonging to different castes and communities. The villagers take it as a sacred duty to attend the shrine of Manasa and observe the worship from close quarters. Manasa of Tantipara has got widespread fame in the cure of snake-bite cases and naturally she is approached by many people of the region belonging to different castes, classes and religions. During annual festival of the deity most of the devotees approach the *Deyashi* for a ceremonial tying of the body through charms to keep themselves safe from the attack of snakes. It is a very popular and essential procedure adopted by the *Deyashi* during the annual festival of Manasa. The person concerned is asked to sit in front of the *Deyashi* when the latter throws some mustard seeds after reciting magical formula over these towards the particular devotee. Sometimes a few pieces of herbs are given to the devotees in question to tie these round their arms as talisman. There is a strong belief in the locality that the ceremonial tying of body through charms becomes very much effective if it is done on the day of annual festival. It is because of this belief the shrine of Manasa at Tantipara village becomes over-crowded by the people from different villages to get themselves tied by magical charms for preventing the attack of snakes.

The fisherman community has their own party for singing *Manasajat*. With the help of *bisumdhaki*¹⁸ they praise in the name of Manasa by singing songs based on Manasa's appearance

and her establishment in the earth as a saviour of mankind. It is a very attractive programme and men, women and children come to the shrine from far and near villages to hear the singing of *Manasajat*. There are some veteran old singers who create an atmosphere of panic and wonder during their rhythmic illustrations of Manasa's glory through songs.

The villagers of Metela worship the goddess Manasa two times and at two different places. One of the goddesses belongs to the village proper, whereas the other comes from a different village by initiation. The goddess Manasa who visits Metela village on an appointed day exerts a well-knit influence on the life and activities of all the people belonging to different castes and communities. It is seen that right from the formal invitation of the goddess a close co-operation of the different people at different levels is developed which lasts up to the moment of her departure from the village. Ceremonial reception to the deity by the showing of *mangal ghot* is given by the womenfolk irrespective of castes and communities. Some of them blow conch shell and produce the sound of *ulu* in honour of the deity. There are some persons who come forward with potful of water and wash the feet of *Deyashi*, carrying the goddess on his lap and bow down with profound respect. The *Deyashi*, who is Sadgop by caste, receives due regard even from the Brahmins during the period of his carrying the deity towards the shrine. The worship of the deity is controlled and directly supervised by the village headman and he receives the first blessings from the deity on behalf of the villagers. The joint work of worship conducted by both the Brahmin priest and the Sadgop *Deyashi* is the embodiment of mutual understanding of two spheres of religious activities. Table 7.10 would forward a picture of participation of the multi-caste village people in the different spheres of activities relating to the worship of Manasa.

The other deity who is worshipped by the Bauri *Deyashi* at *Chanditala* similarly bind the people of the multi-caste village into a close perspective at the time of her worship. The procession of the villagers at the time of bringing *Manasa-bari* creates an atmosphere of overall integration of various grades of people on the open fields, village paths and at the premises of the shrine. The procession starts from the tank and on its way to the shrine a number of feats are arranged which are equally enjoyed

TABLE 7.10 : Nature of Caste Participation during the Annual Worship of Agar Manasa at Metela Village

Caste Participation	Service Pattern	Village Affiliation
Goala/milkman	Fixation of date for worship	Metela
Sadgop	Sending of intimation to Agar	Metela
Dom	Intimation to the villagers	Metela
Dom	To play music	Metela and other neighbouring villages
Moyra/confectioner	Cleaning of the Shrine	Metela
Sadgop	Carrying of Manasa to Metela village	Agar
Grahacharya	Supervision of the stages of worship	Metela
Brahmin	Performance of <i>Yajna</i>	Metela
Brahmin	Animal sacrifice	Metela
Sadgop	Offering of ceremonial blessings of the deity.	Agar
Goala/milkman	Receiving of blessings on behalf of the village	Metela
Brahmin	Sprinkling of <i>santijal</i>	Metela
Karmakar/ blacksmith	Plucking of flowers	Metela
Sutradhar/ carpenter	Supply of wooden faggots for <i>Yajna</i>	Metela
Bagdi	Supply of milk	Metela
Sadgop	Distribution of <i>prasad</i>	Metela
Goala/milkman	Collection of subscriptions from villagers	Metela

by the people of different villages in addition to the villagers of Metela. The procession on its way to the shrine stops at a more or less open space just at the approach of the village proper. Here a group of musicians with *Bisamdhaki* sing *Manasajai* at the top of their voice. A large number of persons from neighbouring villages wait here to hear and observe the different performances in connection with the bringing of *Manasa-bari*. Besides this, the reputed *gunins* and *ojhas* attend the particular site to pay their regard to the goddess. They are seen to engage in *sanki*¹⁹ performance—a special method of competition through charms. The *gunins* praise in the name of their respective *gurus* and come down to start *mantra*-fight. The

oral skirmish presented in rhythmic verses based on various feats of the goddess Manasa in relation to the celestial as well as earthly spheres becomes, at times, serious and fierceful. Formerly it was associated with *Jhapan*²⁰ or the show of various tricks and feats with live snakes. A number of expert snake-players from different villages used to participate in this special show characterized by a mixed feeling of fright and delight. But now-a-days no such feats with live snakes are exhibited due to want of experts in this line. However, with the *mantra*-light the procession moves on through the village path. At the important crossings it stops, when *sanki* performance is held in full swing. The *Deyashi* and his assistants slowly proceed towards the shrine and the large crowd follows them through the village path.

The Bauri *Deyashi* performs a large number of rites and rituals in front of the deity when, it is seen, that numerous persons belonging to almost all the caste-groups approach the *Deyashi* for getting *chaman*-oriented medicines for warding off supernatural influence as well as protective devices against snake-bite. In the evening *manasa mangal gan* is performed on a specially erected platform. A local party is called for the purpose. The melodious song-oriented stories of Manasa's influence on man and earth are systematically depicted by the singers which are enjoyed by a large number of audience throughout the night. The villagers of Metela and three other adjoining villages observe *arandhan* or abstinence from cooking for the day of Manasa worship. The ovens in the kitchen of all households are not kindled, on the contrary these are cleaned with cow-dung paste and decorated with *alpana* or drawings by sun-dried rice paste. A twig of *Cactus indicus* (*sij-manasa*) is placed inside each oven which is worshipped ceremonially. On the day of *arandhan*, it is customary to take rice which have been kept overnight soaked in water. In the next morning the womenfolk bow down before the oven and praise in the name of Manasa. Then the twig of *Cactus indicus* is taken out of the oven and it is ceremonially immersed in the tank from where *Manasa-bari* has been brought. This indicates the ceremonial completion of Manasa worship in the villages.

The festival centering round the worship of Mahadana of Shibpur and Metela villages indicates a systematic trend of

people's participation without any discrimination. All the inhabitants of the villages irrespective of castes and classes possess a special reverential attitude towards these roaring deities. It has been seen from the discussions in the earlier chapters that various momentous happenings in the day-to-day life of the villagers during the past periods have aroused a special outlook in connection with the Mahadana. The *Deyashis* of Mahadana at Shibpur and Metela villages belong to Bagdi and Bauri castes respectively and they apply considerable amount of magical procedures during worship and related activities. There are various developments of supernaturalism in the propitiation pattern of the deities—there are various secret affairs which are strictly observed by the *Deyashis*. It is for this reason Mahadana receives immediate attention of the villagers of all levels. The Mahadana of both the places are very often approached by the villagers specially to ward off evil influences. There is a custom in almost each and every household of the locality to send some offerings to Mahadana through the *Deyashi* for the purpose of keeping the new-born babies out of danger that comes through supernatural way. As a deity residing in the open paddy fields the cultivators, irrespective of castes, classes and religions, of Shibpur village arrange for special propitiation of Mahadana. The people of Metela village do not come down to the particular tank after evening where Mahadana is believed to reside. Occasionally some households arrange for special worship of Mahadana at the *ghat* of that tank. These are done as a protective device against Mahadana's wrath that may fall on anybody even for a slight negligence to him. The official woman 'possessor' of Mahadana at Shibpur village is Bagdi by caste. She is respected by all the persons of the village and surrounding region as she is the embodiment of Mahadana and on her the well-being of the village and its people is strictly dependent. There are occasions when the higher caste people offer red-bordered sari, vermilion, sweets and some cash to the 'possessed' woman in order to get her blessings to win over various crises in life. At Metela village the Bauri *Deyashi* transforms by his special mystic power any person belonging to any community with the possessor of the day. He then begins to work according to the will of the *Deyashi*. All the attending villagers jointly appeal before him

for the presentation of the preventive medicine against epidemics in the villages. The *Deyashi* constantly compels him to find out the said medicine and when this particular performance is held the villagers belonging to different castes and communities unitedly show due reverence to the *Deyashi* and jointly pray before the deity for their general welfare. In the evening of the day of worship there is a custom to hold grand feasts at the houses of *Deyashis* when the collected rice, vegetable and sacrificed animals are cooked. All the persons directly or indirectly connected with the organization of worship of Mahadana including the musicians, liquor booth owner and supplier of flowers or *bel* leaves for worship are invited. Some of the influential villagers and well-wishers belonging to higher castes are also invited. Most of them attend the ceremony and receive dried *prasad* from the hands of the *Deyashi*.

Goddess Kali of Shibpur, Metela and Bhanra villages, worshipped by Bagdi and Bauri *Deyashis*, has exerted due influence on the land and people of the region. Though the goddess in question is worshipped at these three places by the lower caste people, yet during the festival of worship there is no discrimination amongst the castes and classes. All the villagers participate in the festivals equally and all the households send offerings to the deity. The goddess Kali at Shibpur is whole-heartedly regarded as tutelary deity of the village and nobody dares to neglect her for a moment. It has become the regular custom for all the castes in the village that during all the ceremonies in life-cycle of an individual the goddess Kali should be invoked and she should be adored with due regard, failing which, it is believed, the life of the person concerned would readily be thrown into dangerous situation. In order to keep themselves away from any unforeseen mishap the people of Metela and Bhanra villages and other surrounding region arrange to pay respect to the goddess Kali whose worship is generally performed through various magico-religious activities. It is seen that the villagers belonging to all castes and classes have a general weakness towards these magico-religious performances. These are supported by various untoward evil influences that have effected on the life of the disbelievers. This particular trend has done a great deal in attracting a large number of persons to collect in a body to participate at the various stages of

the festivals relating to the worship of the goddess Kali in these three villages in question. The ceremonial bringing of *bari* from the rivulet or tank in these villages is regarded as an auspicious happening and everybody should observe this ceremony and join in the procession meant for invoking the deity. It is for this reason people belonging to all castes, classes and religions flock to the road-sides even at the dead hours of night for having a look to the ceremonial bringing of *bari*. The dancing of the female "possessor" in a wild manner at the shrine of Shibpur, the special magical performance conducted by the *Deyashi* on the celebrated "seat of three skulls" at the shrine of Metela, and also the tremendous shaking of the body through possession of the deity as performed by the *Deyashi* at Bhanra village—all these create a dreadful atmosphere before the attending people. But it is to be noted that this awful situation does not act as repulsive factor, rather it attracts the people as it is taken as an essential institution to ward off troubles from life. Everything is understood and analysed here through supernatural perspective and the villagers, who are very much influenced by supernatural understandings, flock to the shrines of the goddess Kali to get their troubles washed away by the infliction of magical look as well as occult performances conducted by the "possessor" of the deity.¹ Besides this dreadful situation, the people belonging to all castes and classes come to the shrines just on the eve of immersion of the *bari* to receive blessings of the deity through the *Deyashis*. The latter give *ashirbad* to all people by offering a few petals of flower and *bel* leaves from the altar of the deity. The devotees, in return, offer *pranami* to the *Deyashis* in small cash.

NOTES

1. The Brahmin occupy the highest rung in the social ladder and they enjoy a number of benefits by virtue of their social position. In religious sphere the Brahmins hold a very conspicuous position and in almost all the cases their services are essential and sometimes inevitable. The supremacy of the Brahmins in socio-religious field is accepted without any hesitation by all concerned. But there are occasions when this widespread supremacy is challenged. At times,

the Brahmins do not find the summit position in the religious activities performed on a mass scale. The propitiation pattern of the indigenous village deities unfolds the other side of the picture which depicts the upgraded position of the lower caste people through the medium of village deities. The organizers of the worship of these village deities, who mostly belong to the untouchable section of the community, are identified as the "priest" of the people in spite of their low social status.

2. Festivals are regarded as the joyous expressions of mind. Various stages of the festivals are highly influenced by the philosophy of life of the people concerned. These have got some concrete functions in human society which are implemented within the inner recess of the social institutions with which the festivals have got intimate connection. Festivals bring the people of variegated nature and mental attitude as well as social set-up on a common platform of mutual understanding. The folk festivals that are highly characterized by inter-caste and inter-group relationship pattern under mutual obligatory perspectives have got definite functional roles in a highly stratified society. The social scientists look at these festivals not only as a cementing factor which unites the heterogeneous social groups but also as a system which exerts its multi-dimensional influence on the way of life of the people as a whole (Sarkar, 1976: 341). This particular attempt of studying festivals is novel in the sense that it opens a new vista of interactional pattern of various thoughts, ideas, customs, traditions and world view of the heterogeneous human castes and communities.
3. These social scientists have recorded the various roles of festivals in the life of the inhabitants of the villages studied independently by them. These include the following:
 - (a) Dube, S.C.—*Indian Village*, 1955.
 - (b) Majumdar, D.N.—*Caste and Communication in an Indian Village*, 1958.
 - (c) Marriott, McKim—*Village India; Studies in Little Community*, 1955.
 - (d) Lewis, Oscar—*Village Life in Northern India*, 1958.
 - (e) Sinha, Surajit—"Change in the Cycle of Festival in a Bhumij Village", in *Journal of Social Research*, Vol. I, No. 1, 1958.
 - (f) Bhowmick, P.K.—"Some Aspects of Folk Festival" in *Folklore*, Vol. VI, No. 2, 1965.
 - (g) Srivastava, S.L.—*Folk Culture and Oral Traditions*, 1974.
4. Universalization and parochialization are the two unique concepts in the understanding of particular processes in socio-ritualistic field. McKim Marriott in his monumental study in a village in Uttar Pradesh has come across a few interesting socio-ritual phenomena in connection with the propitiation of village deities and also observances of a few festivals, and in order to understand these features he has put forward these two concepts. By universalization he means

the process of "carrying forward and upward, not only of cultural awareness, but also of cultural contents" (1955: 197). While parochialization "is a process of localization, of limitation upon the scope of intelligibility, of deprivation of literary form, of reduction to less systematic and less reflective dimensions" (1955: 200). In the process of parochialization Marriott observes the characteristic creative work of little communities within the indigenous framework of India. Marriott's twin concept of Universalization-Parochialization is helpful in understanding the trend of give and take between the folk and elite traditions.

5. The propitiation of village deities is always followed by different recreational activities. During *puja* festivals arrangements for organizing folk songs and dance-drama are made which are most of the time characterized by local traditions and customs. The local folk singers try to depict the historical background of the development and spread of various indigenous deities in their own line of thinking. When these are presented through song and dance before the rural audience, the latter find no difficulty in understanding the whole state of affair in spite of their backwardness and illiteracy. In most of the villages there are one or more recital parties which are constituted by members of different caste groups. The members of these parties regularly meet in the evening for training as well as practice under the supervision of a teacher who is well-versed in the local traditions and indigenous folk literature.
6. After taking initiation the general behaviour of the *Bhaktyas* witnesses an abrupt change. The members of the different high and low castes who have been maintaining their caste norms and observing social restrictions find a changed situation just after their entry into the fold of *Bhaktyas* way of life. The caste barrier falls, the caste taboo and other restrictions vanish and the concept of pollution becomes out of the question. All initiated persons find themselves in a united sphere in spite of their diverse original caste affiliations. They are recognized as active participants of the festival and their life and activities have been offered to the feet of Dharmaraj. A brotherly feeling develops amongst them and all are conspicuously identified in the perspective of a concerted whole.
7. An exogamous division of a caste. All the members within a *gotra* is presumed to have been descended from or associated with the same ancestor. The main function of the *gotra* is to regulate marriage matches (Mandelbaum, 1972: 143). During ritual performances the reference of a person conducting these is to be made through *gotra*. A person is, therefore, identified by his *gotra*, i.e., through the mystic link from his remote ancestor. During the initiation as *Bhaktya* of Dharmaraj this personal identification is to be given up ceremonially which is done by the priest through a performance known as changing of the *gotra*. All the devotees want to take initiation, first of all, have a holy bath in the tank, and then in wet clothes they sit down

encircling the *Baneswar* placed at the *ghat* of the tank. The priest then comes forward and performs a short ceremony when all the *gotras* of the devotees are changed by a new one which is known by the term *Deb-gotra*, i.e., *gotra* of the gods and goddesses. It signifies the withdrawal of the personal identification of the devotees which is categorically influenced by the highly stratified social system. This is done in order to bring all the *Bhaktys* with diverse social status in the same level.

8. The *Baneswar* is believed to have profuse fertility effect. It is established by the different belief-pattern of the common people. The *Baneswar* is ceremonially carried to the different parts of the village. It is believed that during this 'walk' of the *Baneswar* on the shoulders of the *Bhaktys* the fields surrounding the village are implanted with fertility effect, which acts through different media including air. The ceremonial invitation of the *Baneswar* to a particular family signifies an attempt of bringing fertility effect on men, animals and plants of the family concerned. The close connection of the sterile women with the ceremony of bath of *Baneswar*, as indicated in the main discussion, advocates for the belief in the existence of fertility effect in *Baneswar*.
9. Small earthen pots are locally known as *bhnar* and the ceremony which is centred round these *bhnars* are called *bhnral*. These pots are specially prepared and supplied by the potter caste who generally do not charge anything for it. Sometimes there is an arrangement for customary payment. The *bhnral* ceremony is a characteristic feature of Dharmaraj *puja* in the district of Birbhum. The close association of country-made liquor with a *puja* festival indicates latter's great antiquity and direct link with non-Brahmin rather non-Aryan cult which is still exerting its influence in spite of the adoption of Brahminical procedures to a large extent.
10. It is very painstaking way to appease the deity and generally taken up by the persons who have become the victim of incurable diseases. They take vow before the deity that if they are released, at least partially, from the clutches of the disease, they would show their gratefulness through the performance of *dandi* in presence of a large crowd during the annual *puja* festival. This performance is also held by the devotees before starting any work or conducting any risky activity. It is believed with profound firmness that Dharmaraj would certainly be moved by the extremely troublesome affair relating to the offering of *dandi* and ultimately the *dandi-giver* would be blessed with the deity's grace.
11. It is a long and stout pole made of *sal* wood and is ceremonially implanted vertically on the ground in front of the temple of Dharmaraj. At the top of this vertical pole there is a swinging pole fitted horizontally. This whole system is known by the term '*chadak tree*'. It is regarded by the villagers as animated with life force, otherwise

the *Bhaktyas* would have failed to bear the severe penances like piercing and swinging by iron hooks. Swinging symbolizes nothing but the revolution of the sun. Some scholars consider the swinging performance as a kind of magic which helps the sun move. The swinging in the *chadak* tree by the *Bhaktyas* after piercing their back by sharp iron hooks only is still in practice in Metela village though in all other places throughout the country it has been stopped by legislation. Metela village is perhaps the only exception where the *chadak* tree has been conducting its actual and age-old performance like swinging by hooks without any other supplementary support.

12. Swinging ceremony of the *Bhaktyas* is regarded as a pious activity and also it is full of risk and responsibilities. Naturally the *Bhaktyas* try to get divine permission before commencement of the ceremony. It is performed to get sympathy of Dharmaraj, it is elaborately conducted to appease him and, therefore, it requires the necessary permission from him. This is always done through a supernatural way. The *mul-Bhaktya*, in presence of the priest, places one lotus on the head of Dharmaraj and then some of the *Bhaktyas* wait anxiously for the sudden fall of the lotus. It is firmly believed that the lotus must fall from the head of Dharmaraj in due course which signifies the divine permission for starting the ceremony of hook-swinging. Sometimes it takes a few hours to get the permission through the falling of the flower.
13. The pierced *Bhaktyas* swing on the *chadak* tree in a very fast whirling movement. Whole body weight is carried by the iron hooks pierced in the flesh of back on both sides of the vertebral column. The whirling of the horizontal pole of the *chadak* tree ultimately becomes so rapid that it creates wonder and panic amongst the spectators and thereby enhance reverential tendency towards Dharmaraj.
14. During the whirling movement in a very fast order one of the *Bhaktyas* fell down, and highly influenced by the swinging force his body was thrown far away from the *chadak* tree. It was regarded by the villagers not as a mere case of accident but it was taken as an offence made before Dharmaraj. The *mul-Bhaktya* came to a quick decision that the said *Bhaktya* must have committed a sin, or violated the norms of the *Bhaktyas*, otherwise that particular mishap could not have been resulted. After a few months when I visited the village again for further course of my field work, an enthusiastic informant spontaneously informed me that the particular mishap during hook-swinging ceremony took place due to the fault of the *Bhaktya* concerned. He deliberately molested his wife on the eve of the ceremony and when he was under the restricted life assigned for the *Bhaktyas*.
15. A kind of folk drama with humorous perspective. The subject-matter of it is taken from diverse fields and even the day-to-day life and

works of them find illustrations through *letogan*. Generally the lower caste and illiterate sections of the people are the main patrons of this folk drama.

16. The landing-stair of the Ajay river at Joydev-Kenduli where the celebrated Vaishnava poet Joydev used to take his bath on every *Pous Sankranti* or the last day of the month of *Pous* (December-January) is known as *Kadamkhandir ghat*. Probably the surrounding area of the *ghat* was provided with many *kadam* trees and from which the particular name was derived. There is a local belief that on *Pous Sankranti* the Mother Ganga herself reaches this *ghat* through the flowing water of the Ajay as per her promise made before Joydev in the remote past. This is still pulsating in the minds of the people of the region and they flock to the *Kadamkhandir ghat* on the specified day for taking holy bath.
17. The last day of the month of *Pous* is known by the term *Makar Sankranti*. It is the day when the people of the region take holy bath early in the morning. It is customary to give alms to the poor and also make offerings to the different deities of the locality just after the bath is completed. From very early hours of the *Makar Sankranti* day numerous beggars wait on both sides of the road leading to the *Kadamkhandir ghat*. The local deities are ceremonially brought to the *ghat* and they are placed on the specially built temporary altars. All the devotees come forward to pay their homage to these deities on this auspicious day.
18. A kind of small drum, the body of which is made of hollow wood and both the sides are covered with the skin of goat. It is held in the left hand and is played by striking the stretched skin with the fingers of the right hand. There are arrangements of strings on the body of this musical instrument and pushing of which various rhythmic sounds can be made. It is an essential instrument for the invocation of the goddess Manasa and also for the playing of live snakes by the snake-charmers. It is popularly known as *dug dugi*.
19. It is a *mantra* fight which is held on the eve of carrying of *Manasa bari* to the shrine. The reputed *gunins* come forward to present through *mantras* various glorious activities of the goddess Manasa and their own knowledge and power in the domain of serpent worship and serpent cult. Ultimately they are engaged in open fight, of course orally, which sometimes makes the whole atmosphere gloomy and serious. However, it has got some positive functions in the sense that the experts in this line try to be well-versed in different *mantras*.
20. A performance of presenting various tricks with live snakes. It is generally held on the last day of the month of *Shravana*. It may be called as the annual festival of the snake-charmers or the *gunins* who perform various magical activities relating to the cases of snake-bite. But at the present period jhapan has become obsolete specially due to want of desperate snake-charmers and experts of snakes and also

because of some fatal accidents resulted from the sudden bite of the curious playmates—the snakes—in the past.

21. The official 'possessor' is respected as well as feared by the common people. She is believed to possess certain special magical qualities by means of which she can understand the past, present and future states of various persons. The sudden transformation of the normal body into an abnormal state is explained by the village folk as an occult influence which is practically harnessed by the 'possessor' herself to find out various means to help solve numerous problems of village society.

Conclusion

IN the foregoing chapters that have been employed to focus discernible light on the behaviour-pattern of the rural folk composed of manifold castes and classes a trend of development, growth, pattern of worship and functional attributes of various village deities has been analysed from different sides. It has already been found out that the village deities are not only regarded as the saviours of the rural folk during the different unfavourable conditions of life but also they are taken into account as indispensable factors in the village society as a whole. The cults that have been woven round the annual festivals and other occasional ceremonials of these deities are rooted to the psycho-social behaviour pattern of the people and they have got a general appeal for compromise and cohesion. A general consensus of the folk mind is seen to be reflected in these festivals and the village society ultimately, though for the time being, becomes unified. This unification tendency works as a cementing factor in the highly stratified society. The cults of the five village deities just discussed in a detailed perspective perform manifold purposes. First of all these open up a new vista of studying folk philosophy to follow the term 'ethnophilosophy' as pointed out by Dupre' (1975: 1). A philosophical understanding that is seen deep-rooted into the web of cultural life of the rural folk demands its analysis through the background of cultural anthropology. And in so doing we have come across a large number of facts which pin-point different areas and features of development of folk society, culture and ritualistic beliefs and practices. This folk society, which is characterized

by "small, isolated, non-literate and homogeneous, with a strong sense of group solidarity" (Redfield, 1962: 237), exposes itself in its full vigour during folk entertainments based on folk philosophical standpoint. These entertainments are the outcome of age-old struggling life of the people in the context of diverse life situation. It is due to this fact that the socio-cultural matrix of the rural people participating in these activities, which are obligatory to everybody, is being automatically focused through the direct infliction of ritualistic mode of behaviour. Thus folk rituals and their different integral elements have created an atmosphere of viewing the life and activities of the people and in understanding the social pattern with the help of analysing the trends of their various actions and reactions over different phenomena.

The present study has performed the function of categorical illustration of the activities of the rural folk consisting of diverse caste groups who still not only follow the caste norms and traditions but also think these caste customs are provided with divine sanctions, and all are under the obligation to show due respect to these. The villages studied for this purpose are mostly inhabited by the lower sections of different Hindu castes, viz., the Bauri, Bagdi, Dom, Mal, Lohar, Muchi, Hadi, etc., who participate largely in the folk festivals and connected rituals all the time. These people constitute the large section of the total population and the agricultural activities of the region are practically performed by the direct manual labour of them. Therefore, the study pin-points the life and works of these indigenous people with non-Aryan origin that is still reflected in many of their customs and traditions.

The different phases of socio-cultural interactions between the non-Aryan and the Aryan, between indigenous and modern ideas, and between *shastric* and folk procedures have focused a wide area of human civilization that has been developed through the ages. The results of interactions have done a great deal in the overall establishment of the local indigenous village and even family deities in the religious pantheon of the whole region. Singer considers this field of study as a new development in the domain of social science (1972: 259-60). Shrinivas has shown categorically how the domestic and the local cults of the Coorgs are ultimately linked to regional and all-India cults.

Marriott's study on Uttar Pradesh village has opened a new dimension of looking at village-level festivals through the processes of universalization and parochialization in the background of the wider cultural tradition of Hinduism. We have pointed out here in course of our discussions on the cults and nature of the village deities that the family deities of the lower caste groups like the Bauri and the Bagdi have found a conspicuous position in the traditional Hindu pantheon of the region. The Hinduization of the indigenous family deities of the aboriginal communities has become the very important event in the overall religious sphere of the region in question. The village deities with either total or partial authority of the down-trodden communities have gradually found suitable positions in the orthodox Hindu social setting.

A slow but effective process of sanskritization has converted the nature and mode of behaviour in relation to the village deities and also their low caste proprietors. Dharmaraj has put forward an illuminating example of this trend of sanskritization. It has been seen that a popular folk deity with crude form and non-Aryan viewpoints has been receiving due importance from the Great Hindu Tradition, and at present the deity is to be found in the various stages of sanskritic development. The trend of sanskritization of Dharmaraj adversely vary with the very nature and actual social atmosphere of the particular village or the locality. Various stages in the long process of worship of Dharmaraj highlight numerous features of sanskritization of indigenous beliefs and ideas. It has categorically been seen that the villages with high caste influence specially with Brahminical authority provide more sanskritized ideas in the rites and rituals of the deity in question than the villages with less influence of higher caste groups. Thus in Tantipara village many items of indigenous nature have been obliterated. The hook-swinging, in the strict sense of the term, has been stopped and the different stages of worship of the deity are characterized by Brahminical procedures. The *homa* or burning of the sacred fire ceremony runs parallel to the way that is followed by the orthodox Brahmin priests. In Metela village it has been seen that the Brahminical tradition has exerted conspicuous influence on the procedure of worship of Dharmaraj but at the same time the indigenous pattern has kept its distinctive

feature. Sometimes regular clashes in between Brahminical and indigenous traditions are met with but these are always subsided by village-level compromising attitude conditioned by age-old mutual understanding amongst different castes and communities. In this village the *Yajna* ceremony with tremendous Brahminical influence, replacement of *handia* by milk in the *bhanral* performance, are seen side by side with the indigenous accomplishments like hook-swinging, *jiyban*, *kanta-jhap*, etc. The other three villages like Ekabbarpur, Tentulbandh and Lakshindarpur are mainly populated by the lower caste people and direct Brahminical influence is less prominent here. It is because of this fact the process of sanskritization is not so much effective in these places and the dominancy of the lower caste groups are greatly seen though their activities are controlled by the orthodox traditions in a few cases. The village deity of a remote indigenous origin like Dharmaraj is now in the different stages of cultural metamorphosis which has been effected by the slow and steady infliction of Brahminical beliefs and ideas through the ages.

The other deities like Chandi, Manasa, Kali and Mahadana are to be seen in the different levels of sanskritization. These deities are principally worshipped by the non-Brahmin priests or *Deyashis* and in villages where influence of higher caste groups is great the orthodox Brahminical tradition has been penetrated into the cults of the deities. The presence of the Brahmin priest is essential during the worship of Chandi of Lauberia village for conducting a solitary performance of offering of sacred thread to the deity. The other activities of worship are performed by the Bauri priest himself. In Metela the Bauri *Deyashi* does everything and no Brahmin priest is required to perform any sanskritized activity. In some shrines such as Khairadihi (Mangal Chandi) the influence of Brahmin tradition is great and the Tantubaya *Deyashi* extends full co-operation with him as per norms of the locality in respect of showing due regards to the Brahmin priest. In Joydev-Kenduli the *homa* is performed before the Manasa by the Brahmin priest and in Tantipara the Brahmin priest is ceremonially engaged by the *Deyashi*, a fisherman by caste, to perform the ritual of placing of the *bari* before the deity. The Bagdi *Deyashis* of Bhanra and Shibpur villages perform the worship of Manasa.

Kali and Mahadana partly with the help of the priests of their own community.

The non-Brahmin *Deyashis* of these village deities belong principally to two castes—the Bauri and the Bagdi. These two castes of the region under study launched reform movements during the different periods and through overall enthusiastic attempts they had introduced Brahmin priests and thereby made an attempt to raise their social status (Sarkar, 1966: 227). These Brahmin priests serving the Bauris and the Bagdis had to face degradation from their own Brahmin community due to their rendering of service in favour of the low graded castes. But they receive due respect from their *jajmans* and they are ceremonially invited by the latter in religious performances. These Brahmin priests after their appointment have started to introduce the Brahminical procedures in the indigenous cults as soon as they have got opportunities in this regard. In this way gradual sanskritization of the indigenous village deities are being effected and where trend of sanskritization is somewhat conspicuous, the higher caste people come forward to establish their direct attachment with ritualistic performances of the different village deities.

The *Deyashis* of the village deities so far discussed belong to various non-Brahmin castes and some of them even come from untouchable section of the community. It has already been shown that these *Deyashis* command great respect from the general people by virtue of their capabilities of acting as mediators between spiritual world and man. The particular *Deyashis* and their respective families automatically receive reverential treatment from the common people and also from the members of their own community. It is true that there is no bar for the members of the community to mix, eat and drink with the *Deyashis* belonging to the same community but still the *Deyashi* families get a special position in the society due to their ceremonial linkage with the deities. This particular situation has given the *Deyashis* an advantageous position in their respective societies and also in the socio-ritual sphere of the region which ultimately has awarded them a bit higher position in the mind of the people of the locality. After the introduction of the Brahmin priest in consequence of reform movements the spheres of activities of the *Deyashis* have been disturbed to some extent

and they have been compelled to give up some of their essential claims in the domain of religion of the locality to accommodate the Brahmin priest as per decision of the community concerned. Most of the time a trend of co-operation is always seen between the activities of the *Deyashis* and those of the Brahmin priests. But at times clashes are frequent specially when economic interest comes to the forefront. The Brahmin priest dictates on different aspects of worship which are directly conducted by him. Thus during *homa* ceremony, which is one of the main factors of sanskritized part of the cult, the Brahmin priests generally exert their all round influence and claim a conspicuous position. Sometimes they go to the extent of saying that these indigenous village deities have been "enlightened" by their new procedure of worship through the utterings of Sanskrit hymns and incantations. These have naturally brought an atmosphere of professional conflicts, and specially in the worship of these village deities the dichotomy of ritual performance has resulted a very disgusting situation. The Brahmin priests though a latter introduction and practically appointed by the *Deyashis* to perform sanskritized parts of the cults against some remunerations have gradually established firm roots in these festivals by abrupt introduction of Brahminical procedures in the pattern of worship. This *brahminization* of village deities are to be seen at various levels of development.

Dharmaraj, as has been mentioned before, has undergone a thorough change through the infliction of rapid Brahminical traditions. Many new items of worship have been interpolated into the age-old system of propitiation of Dharmaraj and by virtue of which Dharmaraj has received a conspicuous position in the Great Hindu Tradition. The indigenous elements are still functioning and the native communities perform various items of worship in their own line of thinking. Profuse use of rice-beer, fierceful hook-swinging, walking on burning charcoal are the outstanding features of the indigenous tradition in the cult of Dharmaraj. The other deities discussed in this treatise are comparatively less effected by the direct Brahminical tradition. Different items of daily and annual worship of these deities are highly characterized by indigenous thoughts and ideas. People belonging to the higher caste groups attend and observe the cults of these deities but they keep themselves aloof

from active participation. In these folk festivals the Little Traditions are very much distinctive and the items belonging to the Great Traditions have not been penetrated into the inner recess of these cults mainly because of direct influence of the lower caste groups who are regarded as the initiators of these folk cults.

Large scale influence of the Brahmins due to sanskritization of the deities as well as later introduction of the Brahmin priests amongst the degraded lower caste groups have no doubt resulted a fruitful field in the spread of Brahminical procedures in the sphere of folk cults. But these regional folk cults have not been transformed totally into the Brahminical perspective through rapid throwing away of the indigenous elements. No doubt the non-Brahmin *Deyashis* of the village deities control the people of the locality in their every movement as the formers are regarded as the direct mediators between the folk and the deities. Besides this, they help considerably the ailing people to fight with the diseases by prescribing various folk medicines. The shrines of the village deities are the people's only spot of reliance at the time of their dangerous and helpless conditions of life caused by the demons of disease. These demons are readily fought out and are effectively controlled by the *Deyashis* when the diseased persons approach them through traditional procedures. The mutual bond of relationship between the folk practitioners and the patients—the *Deyashis* and the *faridis*—conditioned by love and friendship maintain the close link of the people with the indigenous propitiators of the village deities. The total dependence of the people irrespective of castes, classes and even religions on the *Deyashis* during their acute crises of life gave the latter an overall advantage to spread their direct influence and thereby maintaining the indigenous nature of the deities and their respective cults. The pattern of interactions between the *Deyashis* and the Brahmin priests sometimes becomes complicated specially when the Brahmin priests try to surpass the *Deyashis* by virtue of the great traditional perspectives. There are occasions when the Brahmin priests publicly declare the healing art of the *Deyashis* as futile attempt to solve the actual problem; there are so many instances when the Brahmin priests make serious attempts to undermine the activities of the *Deyashis* in the eyes of the public. The *Deyashis*

take these challenges in sporting spirit and they do not find any difficulty in maintaining the traditional system of worshipping the deities and in treating the patients through divine assistance. The life of the rural folk here is largely characterized by supernatural beliefs and occult practices which ultimately have contributed to develop the central core of destiny-oriented value patterns and world view of the people. As a natural consequence the rural folk think it is desirable as well as dependable to have a deep faith in the supernatural way followed by the *Deyashis* who have got miraculous influence over the supernatural world.

The people of the region are keen and serious enough to evaluate all these situations and they behave according to the tradition of the locality. This behaviour-pattern maintained by the diverse castes and classes in their daily life indicates an atmosphere of compromise and co-operation. The falling of the social barriers of castes and sometimes of classes during the various phases of the cults, the obligatory relationship amongst the different caste groups during the performance of certain features of worship and the integrated pattern of *Deyashi-faridi* relationship based on folk therapy are the instances of accommodation in multi-caste society characterized by the existence of different classes. The region of study became the target spot of various socio-religious and political movements during different times. Sometimes these were so tense that human life had to receive severe blow from various sides. As a result of those untoward situations the rural society became bewildered and the age-old caste and class relationship patterns were affected to a considerable extent. But all the tense situations arising out of caste and class struggles had been automatically neutralized by deep level action of the age-old unificatory system of castes and classes in the midst of various folk cults throughout the year. These folk cults are not mere rites and ceremonies but these are regarded as the *summum bonum* of life situation. These ritualistic performances centering round various village deities are conditioned by fraternity, amicableness and mutual understanding despite universal differences in social status as per rules of the deep-rooted caste system, and approved interpolated ideas about class consciousness.

The behaviour-pattern of the people of the region is

characteristically distinguished by the intermingling of sanskritic and indigenous traditions in every step of life. The more or less inaccessible nature of the region as well as its high percentage of various lower caste groups like the Bagdi, Mal, Muchi, Lohar, Dom, Bauri, Hadi the indigenous way of life is being properly conducted here. The impact of any large-scale industry has not yet been able to bring forth any effect on the overall life of the region. The agriculture-based economy is still exerting its influence in the life of the people of this locality and they naturally find necessary leisure to conduct the folk festivals that are centred round the worship of different village deities. The propitiation of these village deities are based on many motives but these are found to be centralized on three main purposes—(i) to bring prosperity in agricultural works, (ii) to save life from diseases as well as from sudden attacks of perilous creature like snakes, and (iii) to keep to the society away from the malicious effects of haunting spirits. Different rites and rituals pertaining to the worship of Dharmaraj are the embodiments of prosperity-oriented beliefs in relation to agricultural activities. It has already been seen in the previous chapters that there are large number of magical rites and indigenous procedures to invoke the earth for good harvest. There are some rites which are practically designed to inflict fertility in earth and in women. The *bhanral* ceremony of the *Bhaktyas* is an indication of fertility cult. The rice-beer is regarded to have some fertility effect—it is believed that rice-beer when falls on the ground during the wild dancing of the *Bhaktyas*, it impregnates fertility in the soil. Some deities are regularly propitiated to ward off diseases and epidemics, a few are worshipped to prevent snake-bites. The life and activities of the people of the region are oriented on these beliefs and attitudes towards the deities as well as natural phenomena. All the higher and lower caste groups are seen to be united together through the various modes of worship of the village deities. Different centres of the Great Hindu Traditions are effectively attended by the indigenous deities under the sponsorship of the lower caste *Deyashis*. Thus at Joydeb-Kenduli during the famous Vaishnava festival on the occasion of the celebrated advent of the poet Joydeva, the Chintamani Manasa is brought to the sacred centre at Kadamkhandi *ghat* by the Bagdi *Deyashi*. In addition to the performance of various Vaishnava rituals the

pilgrims approach Chintamani Manasa for getting her blessings through the *Deyashi*. The sacred centre at Bakreswar with extensive Saivite background is characterized by the presence of indigenous deity-like the Shasthi and also the indigenous belief pattern relating to the taking of bath in a cold spring—the *Jiyat Kunda*. All the villages studied in this connection present a well-knit picture of fusion of the Great and Little Traditions. The orthodox Brahminical thoughts and ideas are to be seen working just beside the indigenous little traditional viewpoints; a trend of assimilation and compromise is always distinct in the different villages with considerable sanskritic and indigenous deities.

The world view of the people of this region is highly characterized by this compromising attitude that has been developing in the sphere of propitiation of village deities through the ages. The people are in general very much accommodative and they try to solve the problems of their daily life by the adoption of two distinct factors like compromise and tolerance. It is to be noted that the life of the people especially those belonging to the lower caste groups are not necessarily governed by superstitions, ignorance and sorcery. When situation demands, they do not hesitate to come forward to accept the modern methods provided these do not affect their philosophy of life based on indigenous beliefs. The people of the locality have felt the urgent necessity to establish amicable relationship amongst the different surrounding villages. Without any sort of mutual understanding amongst the neighbouring villages and their inhabitants the agricultural economy, which is governed by reciprocal and obligatory patron-client relationship, cannot be smoothly controlled. Various artisan castes living in different villages are to be approached regularly to serve different purposes of agricultural work. In order to maintain a permanent as well as divinity-oriented interrelationship amongst the neighbouring villages a definite pattern of awakening and bringing of village deities has been developed so that a particular village feels glorious to be invited by a fellow village to send a particular village deity for the purpose of propitiation in other village. This feeling has its own advantages—it binds the diverse ethnic groups with different occupations, morals and philosophy in a well-knit bondage of co-operation and friendship. Despite all other minor

conflicts and competitions in different levels amongst the villagers inhabiting in various villages all live together under the shadow of mutual understandings largely formed by two factors—(i) pattern of worship of the village deities, and (ii) participation of diverse caste groups without any discrimination.

On the occasion of annual worship of the village deities each and every household becomes crowded with relatives and friends who participate in the different items of the folk festivals and enjoy various feasts to their hearts' content. The folk festivals provide a broad-based field for free-mixing of various people coming from far and near villages. They come in close contact with each other and apart from religious aspects many discussions of other spheres are held amongst them. Problems of agricultural activities, introduction of new methods of cultivation, and many socio-political situations of the locality are regularly discussed in the background of direct and indirect experience gained by the people in their day-to-day life. These annual meets prepare a fruitful ground for establishing matrimonial relationship as the people from different places get a fair chance to collect profuse information about marriageable sons and daughters and thereby to contact the particular parents for the purpose of finalization of the preliminary talk on marriage. The large fair which always accompanies the folk festivals works as the meeting ground of men, women and children belonging to different categories. The fair fulfils the annual needs of household utensils which are purchased by men and women; the children collect various types of indigenous toys and dolls. The villagers wait for a long time to make their essential purchases in these fairs. The local handicraftsmen get an opportunity to display their commodities there. Some of these fairs become so much crowded that the organisers fall in difficult situation to manage the affair. In Metela village the fair attached to Dharmaraj worship is attended by a large number of persons coming from distant places. The Santals inhabiting in inaccessible tribal villages regularly attend this fair and purchase different commodities. The famous fair that is held at Bakreswar during *Sivaratri*, where the Great and Little Traditions have found a very suitable intermingling feature, is characterized by the sale and purchase of two essential commodities of the agricultural communities—the plough and the *arih* or the measuring

basket for paddy. The village folk doing agricultural activities consider it essential to attend the fair concerned not only to take holy dip in the *kundas* for purification of the body and mind but also to collect the indispensable articles of the works of cultivation as has been mentioned.

The village-level politics most of the time find a favourable atmosphere to spread their influence through the medium of these folk rites and ceremonies. Sometimes inter-caste clashes extend their tentacles to affect the well-knit *puja* performance. The feuds and conflicts which are generally resulted during agricultural activities specially amongst the landowners make a heavy toll in the general consensus relating to folk festivals. The landowners are more often engaged in inter-group and inter-personal clashes specially during the time of drought when supply of water from tanks and ditches becomes essential to save the crops in the field. Different types of conflicts arise centering round the priority of getting water supply and also as regards the quantity of water to be drawn from the tanks with collective ownership. These conflicts ultimately give rise to severe clashes and most of the time these are brought to the courts of law. The clashes of such kind result in the formation of factions in village communities which grow up supported on various castes and nourished by conflicting attitude amongst the villagers. This situation ultimately spoils the amicable inter-caste and inter-personal relationship that is found flourished in the different phases of folk festivals. During the time of general election of the country and also at the time of election of the village Panchayat a tendency is seen to develop a number of class-based factions in the villages. The different political party-oriented working groups which conduct election campaigns in the village take the advantage of so-called privileged and depressed classes. The former class is composed of higher caste groups, whereas the lower caste people are regarded as belonging to the depressed class. Different agents of the political parties, it has been seen, utilise the poverty-laden life of these lower caste people and thereby try to put them against the privileged class constituted by the higher caste groups. Ignorance and simplicity of the people belonging to the lower caste groups help the outsiders to foment the feeling of animosity towards the higher caste people which naturally bring an agitating

atmosphere in the domain of the traditional patron-client relationship in agriculture. The socio-religious activities based on the worship of the village deities are to face problematic situation due to mutual non-cooperation which is the direct result of class conflicts. It is true that nobody likes, rather dares to go against the age-old tradition sponsored by religious sentiments. But most of the time mental earnestness of the people becomes considerably affected. Many higher caste families are found reluctant to send tradition-bound votive offerings of rice to the house of the lower caste *Deyashis*. Sometimes these families become indifferent and try to fulfil the formalities without any ardour. The integrated picture of caste participation in the different phases of the festivals thus become loosen. But the traditional trend of co-operation and mutual understanding do not wipe out permanently and the multi-caste village society never becomes totally disintegrated as the folk festivals conditioned by the participation of all caste groups work as the cementing factor despite all kinds of conflicts and misunderstandings. There are several occasions in the history of the region that a large number and complicated cases of inter-caste and inter-village classes have been settled in the premises of the village deities during their celebrated annual festivals. The very nature of the observance of different items of the festivals requires a well-integrated pattern of caste participation without which the sanctity of the worship of the village deities is believed to be hampered. Therefore, for the interest of the proper performance of the folk festivals connected with the different village deities and also for the cause of smooth trouble-free life, the villagers feel it essential to maintain the sacred tradition of caste participation after forgetting all sorts of earthly conflicts.

The folk religion developed out of the worship and connected festivals of the village deities has its own speciality and it differs, in many respects, from the traditional orthodox religion. The former delves deep into the life of the people in general and its interactions with various phases of human activities have helped in the formation of an age-old philosophical and ethical outlook governing various situations of earthly life. Religion as a whole exerts multiple influences on human life and it permeates all the spheres of social relations. The anthropological study of religion, as observed by Geertz (1977 : 42),

has two-fold operations. In the first phase it includes the analysis of the system of meanings embodied in the symbols constituting the religion proper, while in the second phase it attempts to relate these systems to different socio-structural and psychological processes. Out of these two phases, the first one is comparatively neglected in different anthropological studies on religion and special emphasis is laid on the second phase. But in reality it must be acknowledged that both the stages are to be focused systematically in order to depict the total picture of the authority and function of religion on human life. In the various features of the study same importance has been attached to these two distinct spheres. The village deities like Dharmaraj, Chandi, Manasa, Mahadana and Kali have been discussed in the background of their genesis, nature of worship and their actual position in the religious pantheon of the region with various waves of changes due to incorporation of foreign elements through the ages. A large number of oral traditions, myths and popular beliefs have been presented here and there to understand the trend of development of village deities and their gradual establishment in the soil of the villages. The numerous rites and rituals right from the starting of the *puja* festivals up to the ceremonial immersion of the deities that have been discussed in minor details present a broad-based view of the propitiation pattern of the village deities. Analytical approaches of various items of worship categorically signify the nature and extent of interactions of indigenous and modern beliefs. The analysis of the spheres of activities of the non-Brahmin *Deyashis* and the Brahmin priests in the different stages of the worship and connected festivals not only help in understanding the gradual extension of Brahmin influence but it highlights the moulding of the festive pattern in the background of the social and psychological atmosphere of the locality concerned. The pattern of worship of Dharmaraj, it has been observed, at five different centres is no doubt based on common principles, but various minor and essential items of worship differ considerably amongst themselves which are nothing but the local variations conditioned by the interactions of different religious sentiments. The replacement of rice-beer by milk in the *bhanra* ceremony of Metela depicts the impact of the Great Hindu Tradition into the indigenous folk religion. The offering of the sacred thread

to the Chandi of Lauberia by the Brahmin priest, in addition to other procedures of worship conducted by the Bauri *Deyashi*, illustrates the impact of orthodox religious beliefs on the folk deity sponsored by the lower caste people. But this does not mean that the indigenous tradition is always in the tendency of being overlapped by the Great Hindu Tradition, rather there are occasions to say that these folk traditions are still exerting their influence even in the flourishing fields of the Great Hindu Traditions. The procession with Chintamani Manasa carried by the Bagdi *Deyashi* and accompanied by a large number of persons belonging to the same community through the large Vaishnava fair at Joydev-Kenduli becomes the centre of attraction of all the attending people. The two-day stay of Chintamani Manasa at the annual *gajan* festival of Lord Siva at Tikarbeta village organized principally by the higher caste groups indicates the close association of the deity of the Little Traditional fold in the religious sphere of the Great Hindu Tradition. During the period of staying of Chintamani Manasa on a special altar she is regularly worshipped by the Brahmin priest in presence of the large gathering of the villagers. The rites and rituals in these connections have provided definite perspectives to evaluate the functional aspects of folk religion exerting direct and indirect influences on caste and class-based society with various stages of socio-psychological development.

Thus various cults of the village deities which are at the different phases of development and spread have provided considerable information to feel the pulse of the rural folk in respect of their day-to-day life largely conditioned by different ceremonial functions, customs and traditions, beliefs and superstitions. The sacred geography formed by the representative deities like Dharmaraj, Chandi, Manasa, Mahadana and Kali is characterized by the performances of various ceremonies throughout the year which control the general movement of the people. The formation of various sacred groups for the observances of different phases of the festival is highly specialized by the spontaneous obliteration of caste and class rules with rigid procedures. Numerous rites during the long-term festivities provide ample opportunities not only to enjoy the joyous moments but also to gain due vigour to fight with the hard phases of life. The foregoing chapters have depicted, in diverse

ways, this particular trend in the life of the rural folk. The very attempt of investigating into the inner recess of life of the rural folk which is highly influenced by supernaturalism and fatalism could properly be made through the nature and functions of the folk cults round which all the aspects of village life rotate in a systematic fashion. The folk sacred specialists represented by the *Deyashis* play a great role in maintaining the smooth and trouble-free life of not only the rural folk but also of large number of urban people who frequently visit these folk sacred centres for getting relief from their respective troubles. A good number of non-Bengali traders—the Marwaris—from the local business centre at Dubrajpur regularly attend the shrines of the village deities to be treated by the *Deyashis* through supernatural way. Many come from the neighbouring industrial belt developed round numerous coal mines and surrender themselves before the *Deyashis* with deep faith and due regard to be treated as per indigenous procedures developed and nurtured by these folk sacred specialists through generations. It is seen that the tribal people mostly belonging to the Santal community living in the remote villages of the neighbouring Santal Pargana district flock to these sacred centres during festive occasions as well as other times for participating in the festivals and in order to get supernatural assistance for curing chronic diseases. All these happenings in respect of emigration of the various alien people to these folk sacred zones give rise to an atmosphere of rural-urban and caste-tribe continuum. The rural society is frequently visited by the urban people with different outlook and philosophy, and in course of their temporary stay they inflict many urban-oriented ideas in the rural setting. On the other hand, they receive with heart and soul the indigenous thoughts and ideas backed by supernatural orientation at the time of their treatment by the *Deyashis*—the native practitioners under the perspective of divine tradition. The tribal people unhesitatingly approach the lower caste *Deyashis* and ask for their blessings in order to get relief from diseases and other troubles. They spend considerable time in these villages inhabited by variegated caste groups and during this period mutual interchange of ideas, different views and thoughts invariably takes place. This leads to the opening of a new horizon of caste-tribe interacting pattern depicting a novel picture in the rural sacred zone. The caste-

tribe interactions on cultural level have been occurring from long time past in India which is aptly indicated by Bose (1953) through his concrete analysis on the Hindu method of tribal absorption. The continuous process of absorption of tribal communities in the Hindu social system has resulted in the emergence of many low-lying castes in the pale of Hinduism. Redfield and Singer (1955), and Marriott (1955), while working amongst the peasant communities in India were highly impressed by the continuous interacting pattern of folk and urban traditions. They tried to understand the peasant communities in a continuous process of the greater Indian social context. Following their lead Sinha (1959) attempted to highlight "the vital elements of continuity between tribal cultures and Hindu peasant traditions" (1959: 311). The continuity of cultural traditions in the highly stratified society in India has become the special feature. Proper understanding of the Indian society inhabited by tribal-folk-peasant-urban communities could be made in all respects only when the cultural continuity is effectively traced through the media of various facets of life function. Bhowmick in his recent study observes that different ethnic groups with diverse cultural and social systems had come face to face which resulted a confrontation between Brahminical system and other non-Brahminical pattern of life. From his extensive study in the frontier region of Bengal he has emphasised that "due to various degrees of interactions, sometimes conflicts among the groups force many social groups of different nature into large social units by gradually minimizing many group differences" (1975: 5). The continuity of cultural features is very much conspicuous in these social fabrics characterized by conflict, tension, composition and integration that are accentuated by historical events. He goes to the extent of saying that the historical stresses and strains have contributed towards the shaping of socio-cultural life of the region concerned not by the process of transformation, rather these are influenced by reinfused diffusion (1976: 360). The socio-historical processes that are clearly accentuated in the conduction pattern of the various stages of the village festivals in the region under study deserve special explanation. The different stages of the festivals connected with the propitiation of village deities which have so far been categorically discussed provide ample

evidences of the continuity of cultural traditions through the ages. The village deities are to be regarded as the store house of different patterns of interactions relating to the variegated communities with dissimilar life-ways and thought-ways. These have helped directly in unveiling the underlying picture of rural society in reciprocal action.

The innate philosophy of life of the lower caste groups represented by the Bagdi, Mal, Lohar, Bauri, Dom, Muchi and Hadi, who are the principal architects of the cultural landscape of the region, demands thorough investigations and analysis in order to get a total picture of the social and cultural contour of the region. The nature of worship of the village deities and organizations of various cults that have been discussed under various perspectives are characterized by the direct manifestations of mode of behaviour of these rural communities. In course of time the conspicuous higher caste groups have joined their hands with the rites and ceremonies so far being conducted by the lower caste communities. Thus in all the village-level festivals it is seen that the dominating cultivating caste like the Sadgop, weaver caste like the Tantubaya and artisan castes as exemplified by the Sutradhar, Moyra, Karmakar and Swarnakar have come to the forefront to shoulder the responsibility of the village-level cults of the deities. Their active participation has made, in later course, the intellectual dominant caste like the Kayasthas and the priestly caste like the Brahmins to turn their eyes towards these rites and ceremonies which have ultimately done a great deal in the practical establishment of mutual understanding between the lower Hindu castes and sophisticated Hinduism nurtured by the higher caste people. Thus in spite of economic backwardness and social segregation these lower caste people find ample opportunities to stand side by side with the higher caste people *vis-a-vis* to enter into the threshold of sophisticated Hinduism. The sanskritic rites conducted by the Brahmin priests and the non-sanskritic rites performed by the non-Brahmin *Deyashis* at a time and inside the same shrine of the village deities is an indication of reciprocal understanding between the two folds of Hinduism—indigenous and sophisticated—which performs the essential function of providing social equilibrium as well as maintaining broad-based understanding despite many socio-economic and religious hindrances.

The five village deities—Dharmaraj, Chandi, Manasa, Mahadana and Kali—their non-Brahmin *Deyashis*, Brahmin priests and their attendants, *mul-Bhaktyas*, *Bhaktyas*, *Baneswar*, the animated *chadak* tree, *faridis*, *ban-carriers*, *dandi*-performers, participating personnel, women *bratees* and the general public belonging to various castes and communities constitute an integrated socio-religious perspective. It is so well-knitted that at times it is very difficult to separate one item from the other and to view the various features independently. The holistic approach to this integrated perspective conditioned by age-old customs, traditions, beliefs and practices that has been made in the foregoing discussions through different chapters, directly helps in the understanding of the socio-cultural life and activities of the rural folk constituted by the Bagdi, Mal, Lohar, Dom, Bauri, Muchi, Hadi communities and other higher castes of the greater Hindu society. The genesis and spread of various rites and practices together with the categorical discussions on the people's participation based on traditions in respect of the village deities, have highlighted the impact of indigenous religion on the cultural perspective of the whole region and the nature of movement of the people as a whole.

Glossary of Castes and Tribes

I

Ahir Goala—These people belong to milkmen caste. The Ahir Goalas are largely found in Bihar. They tend cattle and organize business centering round milk and milk products of the domesticated animals. At present some of them have started cultivation. The Ahir Goalas of this locality are supposed to have been migrated from the neighbouring Bihar province. They enjoy a high social status, and water from their hands is accepted by all caste groups.

Bagdi—The Bagdis are the major cultivating and fishing caste in the region under study. They are supposed to have been derived from an aboriginal race. The Bagdis possess low social status, though they follow a particular religious belief which is compounded of various elements abruptly borrowed from orthodox Hinduism and the survivals of animistic ideas that are prevalent amongst the aboriginal groups. In this region the Bagdis are divided into nine sub-castes.

Bania/Trader—The trading caste of India, the name of which has been derived from Sanskrit word *vanij* means a merchant. It is a generic name which embraces all the banking and trading castes. Strictly speaking, it is not a caste name at all; no endogamous group is to be found which is exactly co-extensive with the title of Bania. It includes a large number of groups some of which practise endogamy, but it is very often based on the commonness in trading functions.

Bauri—The earth-working and palanquin-bearing caste of West Bengal. They are supposed to be of non-Aryan descent. During the present period a large number of them have taken to agriculture. The social rank of the Bauris is very low. The members of the higher castes do not take water

from the hands of the Bauris. They are traditionally divided into nine sub-castes.

Brahmin—A priestly caste of India, the members of which are engaged in various professions and follow all prestigious means of livelihood. The Brahmins of India are divided into ten large classes—five of which fall in the northern part of the Vindhya range, whereas the other five are found in the southern part of it. The Brahmins found in Bengal mostly belong to the Gaura group which is sub-divided into five main sub-castes—Rarhi, Barendra, Vaidik, Saptasati and Madhyasreni. These are again classified into many sub-groups as per local tradition and belief-pattern. The Brahmins occupy the highest rank in the stratified society of India. At present the Brahmins have accepted variegated secular professions and a small section of them clings to the traditional profession.

Dom—The menial and scavenging caste of West Bengal which occupies a very low social status. The Dom community is a very large one and is divided and sub-divided into many sub-sections each of which centres round a particular profession. A few sections of the Doms are traditional artisans and musicians. These people serve the different higher caste groups in many ways, and sometimes their services become essential. The Doms of the region under study were extensively employed in the army and security forces by the local *rajas* and *zamindars*.

Goala/Milkman—The pastoral caste of India. The internal social structure of the Goalas is very complicated and they provide numerous sub-sections. The Goalas claim their high social status and show mythical connection with Lord Krishna who Himself was a celebrated cow-herder. But in West Bengal their social rank is a bit lower than the Nabasakh group. Sometimes the Goalas are regarded as inferior to the cultivating division of Kaivarta caste. Most of the Goalas of the region under study still cling to their traditional occupation of cattle-herding.

Grahacharya—The Brahmin community which is extensively engaged in astrological studies. They calculate various actions and reactions of the different planets and stars on the life of man and prepare horoscope after a close study of

the planetary system. These people are locally known as *ganak* or calculators.

Hadi—They are menial and scavenging caste of West Bengal and Bihar. The Hadis are divided into nine sub-castes. A section of them, known as *methor*, is engaged in removing night soil, whereas others are attached to different professions like *chaukidars*, musicians and even palanquin-bearing activities. They are thought to have been descended from aboriginal stock. The Hadis occupy a very low social status. The womenfolk of this community are traditional mid-wives.

Jele/Fishermen—They are the fisher caste. It is seen that the Jele is not a particular caste name, rather it is applied indifferently to various caste groups which practise fishing. But in this treatise it indicates the particular caste which is known as Jele Kaivartas. These people solely depend on the profession of fishing. Almost all the Jele Kaivartas cultivate fish in the tank belonging to the higher and economically dominant castes of the locality. They are all bound together in a kind of patron-client relationship.

Kamar/Blacksmith—The Kamars are a metal-working caste mostly confined to West Bengal and Bihar. They are subdivided into eight sections. The Kamars are an essential social group in an agricultural community. Their favourite deity is Viswakarma who is luxuriantly worshipped on the last day of *Bhadra*. The social status of the Kamar is respectable and they belong to the Nabasakh group.

Kayastha—The writing caste of West Bengal. They are recognised as an intellectual caste group. The Kayasthas of Bengal are divided into four sub-castes—Uttar-Rarhi, Dakshin-Rarhi, Barendra and Bangaja. Though the Kayasthas are well-known as the scribe, yet they have advanced much forward, and they have established themselves in a very well manner in the socio-economic and administrative set-up of the country. Their close contact with the ruling power of the different regions, at different times, awarded them prestigious background. They occupy a very high social status. In other parts of India the Kayasthas claim themselves to be the counterpart of the Kshatriyas.

Kolu/Oilmen—The Kolus are oil pressers. They possess oil presses

of their own and extract oil from mustard seeds and sometimes from sesame. This particular occupation is considered derogatory by the people and, therefore, the Kolus are ranked low in the caste hierarchy. The Kolus who have abandoned the oil trade and have accepted the occupation of bankers, money-lenders, shopkeepers take a bit higher social position.

Kumbhakar/Potters—They are the artisan caste and make pots of various kinds. Some of them prepare terracotta dolls, idols and clay images. The Kumbhakars enjoy medium social status and their services are always needed by the villagers not only for their continuous supply of household earthen utensils for daily use but also for the regular supply of special utensils for the *puja* performance. They belong to the Nabasakh group.

Lohar—The Lohars are iron-smelting caste. They were constituted by different large and heterogeneous social groups the members of which were engaged in the profession of iron smelting and, in course of time, they formed a homogeneous group with a common name—the Lohars or workers in iron. The indigenous iron-smelting caste was then thrown out of their profession due to the opening up of large-scale iron-industries, who gradually accepted the works of agricultural labour. They enjoy the social position equal to the Bagdis.

Mahishya—A cultivating and land-holding caste. They are concentrated mainly in the district of Midnapur in West Bengal. They are also known as Halia Kaivartas or the Kaivarta caste which practise plough cultivation.

Mal—The Mals constitute the largest scheduled caste in the region of study. They practise cultivation and most of them work as agricultural labourers. Many of them work as *chaukidars* or village watchmen. Different authorities are of opinion that the Mals have got tribal origin. Some of them say that the Mals and the Mal Paharias have got close connection and most probably the former has been derived from the latter. In social position they are ranked with the Bagdis and the Lohars.

Malakar/Florist—They belong to a class of people who are found to be engaged in making decorations with natural

flowers. More often they prepare exquisite ornaments out of *sola* or sponge-wood (*Aeschynomene aspera*). They make *dak* out of *sola*, coloured papers, mica pieces and silvery thread for the decoration of the clay images of the gods and goddesses. They belong to the Nabasakh group.

Moyra/Confectioner—The traditional calling of this caste is the preparation and sale of sweetmeats. At present many of them have taken to agricultural activities. They enjoy higher social status as they supply sweetmeats for all purposes including the worship of various deities. These people are ranked among the Nabasakh.

Muchi—The Muchis are leather-dresser and cobbler caste who are regarded as a branch of the Chamars, a tanner caste, found all over the country. These people are engaged in tanning, shoe-making and drum-making activities. Some of them act as musicians. The Muchis occupy a very low social status and they are considered as untouchables.

Napit/Barber—The Napits are the very important caste group as their services are essential in the different stages of the *rites de passage* of the villagers. Their traditional occupation is hair-cutting and shaving. But practically they are engaged in multifarious activities. The womenfolk of the Napit community also serve the women patrons, belonging to different *jalchal* castes, in clearing their feet and application of *alta* on the margins of the feet. Their social position is not low, but sometimes they are looked down upon as they attend various caste groups even those which are ceremonially unclean.

Podder—In West Bengal this particular caste is regarded as a sub-caste of the Subarnavaniks which is engaged in money-lending and dealing in gold and silver ornaments. The social status of this caste is comparatively low and they rank below the Nabasakh.

Rajput—The fighting and land-holding caste of the Northern part of India. They claim to be a Kshatriya descent. These people enjoy a very high social status. At present most of them own land and exert a great influence over the territory where they live. The Rajputs of these villages of West Bengal under study are the migrated sections from the original homeland at Upper India. In their original home

the Rajputs rank just below the Brahmins, but in West Bengal they come down to the rank immediately after the Kayasthas and the Vaidyas.

Sadgop—A cultivating caste of West Bengal. The traditional calling of the Sadgops is the agricultural farming, and because of their extensive control over the economic resources they enjoy a bit higher social position in the rural society. According to the tradition of this caste, the original home of them was in *Gopabhum*—the vast tract of land stretching between the Ajay and the Damodar rivers. They are grouped amongst the Nabasakh and claim a status equal to that of the Kayasthas. They are divided into two sub-castes—the *Paschim-Kuliya*, who live to the west of Bhagirathi river, and the *Purba-Kuliya*, whose settlements are found on the east of that river. The Sadgops are commonly known as *Chasa*.

Sunri/Distiller—The Sunris are engaged in such a profession which is regarded as very low in the hierarchical system of caste-based occupational pattern. They belong to the scheduled caste section and hold a very low position in the village social ladder. Many of the persons belonging to Sunri caste are now engaged in trade and commerce. Almost all the liquor shops, *ganja* and opium selling centres are organized by the Sunris in this part of the country.

Sutradhar/Carpenter—The Sutradhars are architects and wood carvers. They are the traditional workers on stone, wood and clay. The Sutradhars prepare clay images of gods and goddesses, and also they make terracotta reliefs and plaques of the temples which are very much prevalent throughout West Bengal. These people are broadly divided into four principal branches which are based on the medium and nature of works they perform. In West Bengal villages the term *Chutor* is commonly used to denote this caste. These people work mainly on wood and occasionally on clay. The social status of the Sutradhar is low. The people belonging to higher castes do not like to take water from their hands.

Swarnakar/Goldsmith—The occupation of this caste is centred round the manufacture of different artistic materials of gold. This precious metal is largely utilized by the people of

India and it has got exorbitant socio-economic value. This particular caste is found all over India. But the Swarnakars of Bengal had developed a special technique in the preparation of gold ornaments and thereby formed a distinct "school of jewellery" in India. The social status of the caste is more or less respectable. Besides working in gold and silver, they practise money-lending business.

Tambuli—The Tambulis are the trading caste, the traditional occupation of which is the selling of betel leaf. Almost all the Tambulis in West Bengal have given up their traditional occupation of betel leaf selling and taken to dealing in grain as well as petty shop-keeping. Some of them hold lands and have become active cultivators. The social position of this caste is somewhat respectable. They claim a position in the Nabasakh group, but sometimes it is opposed by the local caste usage making their social position a bit ambiguous.

Tantubaya/Weaver—The Tantubayas are the weaver caste of Bengal. The word *tantu* denotes natural 'fibre'. The weaving art of these Tantubayas of Bengal once rose to the height of excellence. At present the Tantubaya community performs the art of weaving though its excellence has been retarded to a considerable extent. At present a large section of the caste has taken to agriculture. The transformation of this weaving caste into the cultivating group had been largely effected due to the impact of large-scale mill-made cloths during the British period.

Vaishnava—It is the name of a religious sect. These people propitiate Lord Vishnu and follow a specific way of life. In the then Bengal the Vaishnava sect spread throughout the land in consequence of the teaching of Lord Chaitanya. In colloquial language these people are known as Baistam. In spite of being a religious sect the Baistam practise endogamy like other caste groups and as regards occupation they follow the activities generally taken up by the higher caste people. The caste hierarchy of the Baistam is somewhat ambiguous. But their close connection with various ritualistic performances gives them a respectable position in the minds of the villagers and naturally they receive a bit higher position in the graded society.

II

Kora—An earth-working tribal group which has gone through a tremendous Hindu influence. They are not the original settlers of West Bengal. Being faced by economic hardship these people were forced to migrate from their homeland which was in Southern Bihar. Most probably they are an offshoot of the Munda tribe. On reaching different parts of West Bengal they took up the profession of earth-digging from which the name 'Kora' had been derived. The Koras are expert in tank-digging and road making. The social position of the Koras is very low and sometimes they are classed with lower caste groups in West Bengal villages.

Kurmi—A very large cultivating tribal group of central and eastern India. Agriculture is their traditional occupation and still they cling to this economic pursuit. In the then Bengal and other parts of the country many Kurmi families rose to a high economic status by dint of their perseverance and industrious nature, and ultimately became identified as the *zamindars* of the localities concerned. The social position of the Kurmis is respectable.

Maler—The Malers live in the hilly tracts as well as in the plains of Santal Parganas district in Bihar. They are a section of the large tribe—the Paharia. The Malers belong to the Dravidian group and practise shifting hill cultivation. The Malers are regarded as the ancient aboriginal group that have taken shelter in this part of the country. The customs and ethnic peculiarities of the Malers support this fact. The Malers believe in a large number of spirits who reside in the hills and jungles, and their way of life is largely characterized by the multifarious influence of these indigenous deities.

Mal Paharia—A Dravidian tribe living mainly in the jungle areas of the Santal Parganas district of Bihar. They practise hunting as well as shifting cultivation. The Mal Paharias are divided into two sub-tribes—the Mal Paharia proper and the Kumor-Bhag Paharia. Some are of opinion that the Mal Paharias are the Hinduized branch of the Maler. But it has been opposed by many scholars. The Mal Paharias of West Bengal are the immigrants from the Santal Parganas

district of Bihar. The Mal Paharias of this region are mostly agricultural labourers.

Santal—A large Dravidian tribe which is found mainly in West Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. They are actually the immigrants from Palamou and Ramgarh. They were brought here to clear the jungle and to drive away the ferocious animals in these regions. The Santals are at present settled agriculturists and they live in well-organized villages. A section of the tribe has been engaged in the different industries and has become industrial labourer. They are very fond of festivals which take place throughout the year. The Santals like to live in an atmosphere of mutual understanding and close co-operation with the neighbours. Being faced by time-long oppression, caused by their next neighbour belonging to various caste groups, the Santals of this region became furious and revolted against the mal-treatment which gave rise to a movement known as the Santal Insurrection.

Glossary of Local Terms

Agrahayan—Month of the Bengali calendar corresponding to November-December.

Aguney Kali—The goddess Kali worshipped in the month of *Agrahayan*, a Bengali month.

Akra—Dancing ground (tribal).

Alpana—Artistic drawings drawn by sun-dried rice paste suspended in water.

Alta—Lac dye cotton felt used after moistening in water.

Amabasya—New moon.

Anandalahari—A kind of kettle drum.

Annasatra—Charitable supply of cooked rice.

Ashram—Hermitage.

Asirbad—Benediction.

Asthami—The eighth day of the fortnight of a lunar month.

Asthan—Seat.

Atan—The throne where the deity is seated.

Bakapanchami—The fifth day of the bright half of the Bengali month of *Bhadra*.

Bar—The day before actual worship.

Barbela—A part of the day regarded as inauspicious for starting any important work.

Baroma—The elder mother.

Bauripara—The ward of the Bauris.

Bhadra—A Bengali month corresponding to August-September.

Bhaktiya—Active participant.

Bharnama—The act of being possessed by the deity.

Bhnars—Small earthen pots.

Bhog—The sacred offering to the deity.

Bhogmandir—The temple where sacred offerings to the deity are prepared.

- Bigha*—A unit of land measurement; it is 0.40 of an acre.
- Bill*—Fen.
- Birraj*—The brave king.
- Chadak*—The annual festival of worshipping Siva and Dharmaraj.
- Chadaktala*—The place where swinging of the *Bhaktiyas* is held.
- Chadak Thakur*—The deity associated with *Chadak* performance.
- Chaitra*—A Bengali month corresponding to March-April.
- Chanditala*—The place where the goddess Chandi is worshipped.
- Chandmala*—A decorated coloured necklace made of paper and mica sheet.
- Chasa*—Ploughman.
- Chatni*—A condiment.
- Chaukidar*—Village watchman.
- Chotoma*—The junior mother.
- Dakatey Kali*—The goddess Kali worshipped by the dacoits.
- Dana*—Demon.
- Daroga*—The officer-in-charge of village Police Station.
- Dasahara*—The day on which the river Ganga is ceremonially worshipped in the month of *Asarh*.
- Debgotra*—The gotra belonging to the gods and goddesses.
- Deogharia*—Priest of the Bauri caste.
- Deyashi*—The non-Brahmin priest of folk deity.
- Dhenki*—The husking lever.
- Dhuti*—A white piece of cotton cloth worn by men.
- Dighi*—Large tank.
- Dotara*—A double-stringed musical instrument.
- Ektara*—A variety of monochord musical instrument.
- Fakir*—A mendicant ascetic.
- Gandharva*—A system of marriage which is secretly performed by a willing couple by exchange of garlands.
- Gauda*—The ancient name of Bengal.
- Ghat*—Landing place of a tank or river.
- Ghee*—Clarified butter.
- Ghetwal*—The gate-keeper of a particular administrative territory.
- Ghot*—Clay-made pitcher.

- Gotra*—A exogamous group, the members of which tied together by a belief in common descent.
- Grahacharya*—Astrologer.
- Grambera*—Ceremonial walking through the village.
- Gramya Devta*—The village deity.
- Gunin*—Medicinemen.
- Hal*—Plough.
- Hanria*—Country-made liquor.
- Homa*—Sacrificial fire.
- Jal-achal*—Caste group from which water cannot be accepted.
- Jal-chal*—Caste group from which water can be accepted.
- Jajman*—Patron.
- Jhi*—Daughter.
- Kachu*—Arum/*Arum indicum*.
- Kankar*—A very small particle of stone.
- Kanta jhap*—Jumping on prickly thorns.
- Karmaphal*—The results of one's activities.
- Kartick*—A Bengali month corresponding to October-November.
- Kirtan*—Mass prayer with song.
- Kotwal*—A policeman.
- Kutch road*—Unmetalled road.
- Lalitala*—The place where goddess Kali resides.
- Lathi*—A long strick used as staff often made of bamboo.
- Lathiwal*—A fighter with stick.
- Lohamahar*—Region with concentration of iron ore deposit.
- Magh*—A Bengali month corresponding to January-February.
- Mahajan*—A creditor.
- Mahajnan*—A knowledge about reality, the final knowledge.
- Mahotsab*—Great festival.
- Makar Sankranti*—Last day of the month of *Pous* (December-January).
- Manda*—Sweet blobs.
- Mangalhot*—An auspicious vessel.
- Manasajati*—The ballads praising the goddess Manasa.
- Manasa mangal gan*—The lyrical poem in which the origin, growth and spread of Manasa cult are highlighted.
- Manat*—Vow.
- Mantra*—Incantation or spell.
- Mela*—Fair.

Mejoma—The second mother.

Mul Bhaktya—Chief of the Bhaktya community.

Nabasakh—Nine clean castes from whose hands water can be taken.

Nakra—A kind of drum.

Nunpala—Abstaining from taking of salt.

Padavali—Lyrics.

Paik—Country soldier.

Pandit—A Sanskrit scholar.

Papa—Sin.

Patihala—A primary school.

Phulkhela—Playing with flower; here it means fire.

Pir—Muslim saint.

Pithas—Sanctuaries.

Pous—A Bengali month corresponding to December-January.

Pous Sankranti—The last day of the month of Pous (December-January).

Pranami—Cash offerings made to the deity.

Prasad—Food offerings made to the deity.

Puja—Worship.

Punya—Virtue.

Puran—Myth or Mythology.

Purnaghot—A pot completely filled.

Purnima—Full moon day.

Rainbansh—Royal bamboo.

Raibense—The dance party holding royal bamboo.

Raja—King.

Sadhana—Austere ascetic practice.

Sankrant—Last day of Bengali month.

Santijal—The celebrated water of peace.

Sarbat—A beverage.

Sati—Act of immolation of the widow on her deceased husband's funeral pyre.

Sidhaa—A gift of rice, pulses, vegetables, mustard oil, etc.

Sindur—Vermillion.

Soda—Sodium carbonate.

Sradh—A respectful offering to the manes.

Shravan—A Bengali month corresponding to June-July.

Tantra—A particular form of religious belief and is centred round the cult of *Sakti*.

Thakur—God.

Than—The residing place of a deity.

Tulsitala—The place where the sacred basil plant (*Ocimum sanctum*) is planted.

Ulu—A kind of sound made by vibration of the tongue within the cavity of the mouth. It is practised by the womenfolk.

Vaisakh—A Bengali month corresponding to April-May.

Vaisakhi Purnima—The full moon in the month of *Vaisakh* (April-May).

Vishnu—One of the gods of the Hindu triad—Brahma, Vishnu and Maheswara.

Viswakarma—The Hindu god who is regarded as the creator of the universe.

Yajna—The ceremony in which clarified butter is burnt in a sacred fire.

Yajna Kunda—The cavity where *Yajna* is held.

Yajna-tilak—Painting of sectarian mark after completion of *Yajna*.

Zamindar—Landlord.

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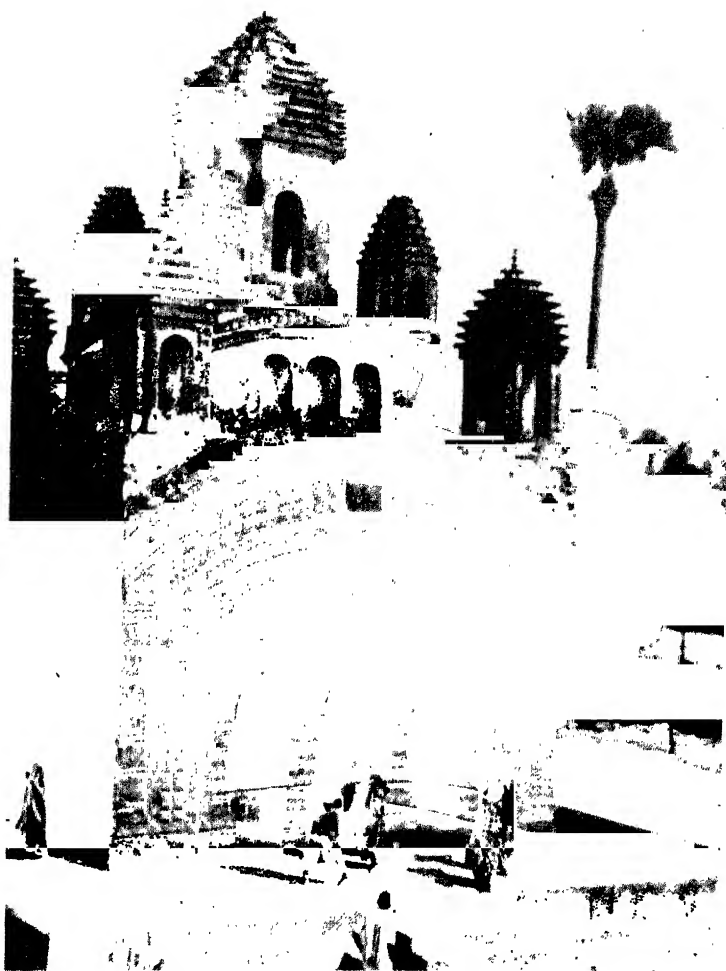
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1. Navaratna Temple of Joydev



2. The celebrated searchers of the "Man of the Heart"



3. Historic Watch Tower of Ichhai Ghose



4. Whipping by *babui*-made lash



5. Ceremonial Walking on the Chests of the Bhaktas by the Brahmin priest



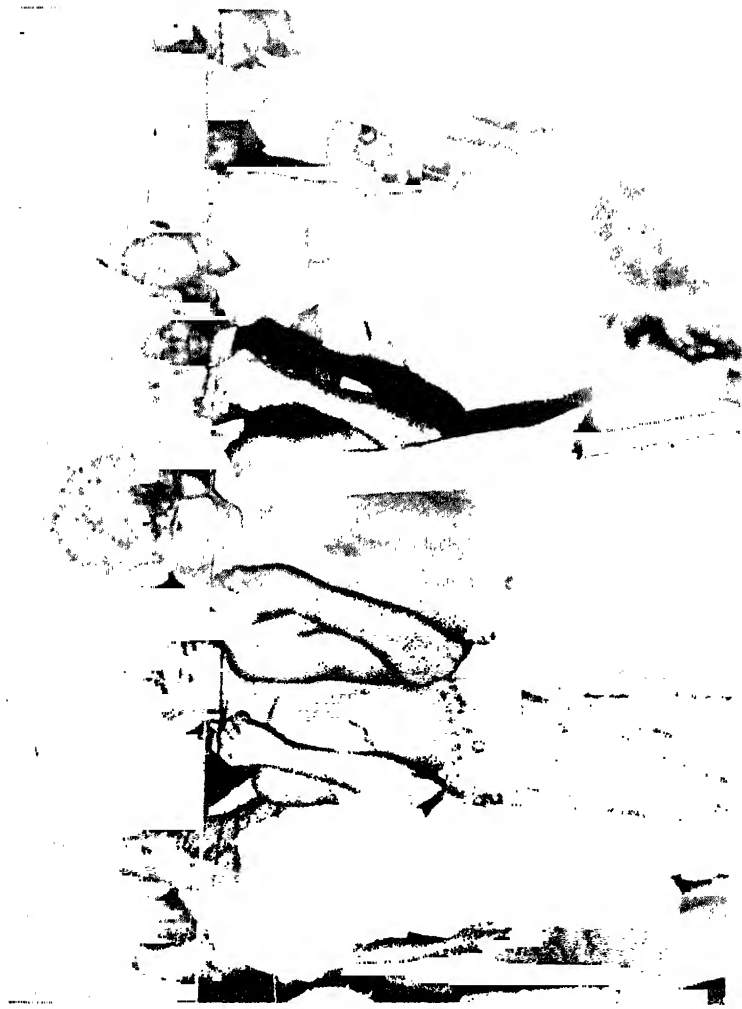
6. Mul-bhaktiya with big pitcher of *hadia* in a glamorous procession



7. Female devotees receiving *dudh-bhanra*



8. *Agniban* carrier proceeding towards the temple



9. Bhaktiyas with Jivban proceeding towards the shrine



10. A Bhakta with Jivban showing various feats



11. Training for the future — Juvenile devotees on the move



12. Bhanral procession moving through the village path



13. Participating in the *gachbera* or "encircling the tree"
ceremony



14. Taking of vow before the Agar Manasa — a folk deity



15. Ceremonial carrying of rice-beer to the shrine



16. The goddess Kali at Metela village



17. A traditional folk healer in action — the author
closely looking into it



18. Piercing of the skin with thick and sharp needles
a hair raising scene



19. The hook-pierced Bhaktiya is ready for swinging



20. Swinging in the air — an event which is hard to believe



21. Just on the eve of Swinging — a juvenile Bhaktya
prays for the blessing of the deity

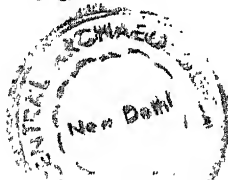


22. Ceremonial carrying of the goddess Manasa to the special altar



23. Goddess Chintamani Manasa at Kadamkhandi ghat

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